THE HOUSE OF WINGATE

SYDNEY HORLER

THE HOUSE OF WINGATE

By the same Author

LADY OF THE NIGHT
CHIPSTEAD OF THE LONE HAND
THE SCREAMING SKULL
THE EVIL CHATEAU
DANGER'S ERIGHT EYES
ETC. ETC.

THE HOUSE OF WINGATE

By

SYDNEY HORLER

Publishers since 1812

HURST & BLACKETT, LTD.
LONDON

Made and Printed in Great Britain
for Hurst & Blackett, Ltd., at
The Gainsborough Press, St. Albans.
Fisher, Knight & Co., Ltd.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	MEMORY TAPS ON THE DOOR	11
II.	APPROACHING THE BATTLE-LINE	37
III.	LITTLE DEVIL DOUBT	50
IV.	THE LOSING BATTLE	61
V.	STOLEN HOURS	74
VI.	SELBY FOWNE: STANDARD-BEARER	96
VII.	THE MAN WHO SNEERED	119
VIII.	THE CHEQUER-BOARD	141
IX.	ON WITH THE DANCE	164
X.	IN THE MESH	184
XI.	THE VERDICT	205
XII.	NURSE FRASER WRITES A LETTER	225
XIII.	ACROSS THE RIVER	244

ALL characters in this book are entirely fictitious

THE HOUSE OF WINGATE

CHAPTER I

MEMORY TAPS ON THE DOOR

I

AS he came swinging round the corner into Harley Street, Richard Wingate did not look as though he were facing the greatest problem of his life. He walked with the purposeful air of the successful man.

Tall, handsome, famous at forty, he gave the impression of having made a very satisfactory bargain with Fate. Destiny, one felt instinctively, was a friend, rather than an enemy, to this man; as a matter of fact, Wingate's friends long since had formed the impression that no one in London managed his life quite so well. The gods had been very good to him, and he had appreciated instead of abused their gifts. Wingate, walking to his consulting-rooms this bright late spring morning, looked strong enough to be captain of his soul. He inspired respect because no one could have mistaken him for being anything but a virile man.

A great many people, recognizing his athletic figure, were pleased to nod, and they seemed even more pleased when they received a nod in return. "Lucky devil!" muttered some, "first-rate chap!" murmured others. "I must call Wingate in," mentally resolved a man renowned in his own branch of medicine.

To be celebrated, admired, trusted, by the big-hearted, envied by the lesser minds, at forty, denotes progress, and Richard Wingate had certainly made progress during the past six years. To-day he was the most sought-after neurologist in London—a nerve specialist possessing brilliance and yet exceptional soundness. His lowest fee for a consultation was fifteen guineas; in special cases it was five times as high. A month before he had gone by air to a Foreign Court, and had brought back with him as a memento of the occasion a cheque for one thousand guineas.

Such a man, one might have said, should not have carried a scowl on his forehead this gladdening sunny morning. Absorbed in his work, successful, amassing wealth at a rate which was almost fantastic, married to one of the most popular young women in London, Richard Wingate's frown was rather perplexing. Perhaps he was thinking of a case which had temporarily baffled him. Selby Fowne, that most popular Society practitioner, noticed the frown as he stopped.

"Was it to-night I was dining with you, Dick?"

These two were old and trusted friends—public school, University, London Hospital, war-experience. This stout, comfortable tub of a man who was the counsellor and confidant of so many frail and imaginative ladies of Mayfair, was very close indeed to Wingate's heart.

"Of course ! If you go making any other arrangements, I'll tell all your pet languishers that you're a fraud, and that your famous 'bedside manner' is really nothing but a pose. In short," concluded the specialist, "I'll send you naked into the world !"

"Not with my figure—it wouldn't be decent !" was the chuckling reply. "But you don't think I'd miss one of Isobel's dinners purposely, do you ? I shall be on hand all right. . . . By the way," his manner changing, "what do you think of Ballaher ?"

Wingate's face, which had momentarily brightened, became grave again.

"I'm afraid there's not very much hope for him." The speaker started on technical details to which Fowne listened attentively. "He should have had treatment before," wound up the specialist ; "it's too late now."

"Poor devil ! Well, at seven-thirty then, you bare-faced robber of the Sick and Suffering !" Selby Fowne, swinging his immaculately-rolled umbrella, darted away.

Wingate walked on towards his consulting-

rooms. Curious what an unholy mess some men made of their lives. That fellow Ballaher, for instance. Rich, well-connected, socially popular, he must needs take to drink and drugs like a maniac because a girl had turned him down. And that girl someone else's wife. . . .

That eternal problem of love. . . . A close watcher would have noticed that, at this moment, Wingate's features hardened a little. Something crept into his eyes which had certainly not been there while he was talking to Selby Fowne. As though realizing that any extension of this mood was likely to be dangerously disturbing, he increased his pace and soon arrived at 700B Harley Street.

Hunter, his secretary, greeted him with respectful cheerfulness, and placed his case-book on the table.

"A busy morning," commented the specialist, after glancing down the page. Hunter, slight, dark, physically insignificant, but mentally efficient, looked pleased. He was proud to be associated with such a man as his employer. In conversation with his friends he was prone to say: "Sir Bernard Hollister called us in at once," or "we soon prescribed for his lordship—a difficult case, but we have seen worse."

"You are the most successful nerve-man in London, Mr. Wingate," he now said, high approval in his tone.

"H'm . . . a very busy morning," was Wingate's somewhat vague reply.

Hunter left the room, delighted. His respect for his Chief increased every day. Wingate to him was an ideal type. Always keen, fit, efficient, a man who took his job seriously and had no false scruples about demanding a proper reward for his services. And although his consultation practice was growing enormously, Wingate's character remained unaltered. There was not a trace of human vanity in him.

A machine—a perfectly-working machine!—was Hunter's mental tribute as he stepped into the handsomely-furnished waiting-room to summon the first patient to the healer's presence.

A machine! Richard Wingate would have smiled at the description. But it would have been a smile of sheer bitterness. And, as he smiled, his face would have hardened in exactly the same way as it had hardened after leaving Selby Fowne. For I think so.

A machine. . . .

II

Yet, as the morning's work was proceeded with, the impression given by the man seated at the table was certainly that of a machine. Wingate listened, asked further questions, prescribed. He did not waste a word. Those who came to him

received little in the way of sympathy, but they gained confidence all the same. They felt that if anyone could help them, this was the man to do it.

But when the last patient had gone, the man who cured soul-sickness in others leaned his face on his hands and stared out through the window as though this room were a prison: a prison barred and bolted, from which he could see no hope of escape.

Hunter knocked, entered.

"Lady Sarah Doone on the phone, sir."

"Put her through."

"Yes, sir."

Wingate lifted the receiver, listened, and then said: "Certainly! I have five minutes before lunch."

"You sweet thing!" came the answer over the wire.

Ten minutes later he stepped out of a taxicab on to the pavement of Brook Street. The thought occurred to him that, if he hadn't such a snug show in Hamilton Circus, he might think of moving to Brook Street. Then he walked up the steps and rang the bell at the well-remembered green door.

Lady Sarah Doone greeted her visitor eagerly. She was a woman of sixty, with an old-fashioned style of dressing, but an exceedingly modern style of conversation. She tried continuously to pose as a disillusioned old woman whose only weapon

left to fight the world was a devastating cynicism. That she did not succeed was due to the fact that everyone who knew her intimately was aware that a kinder heart than hers didn't beat in the whole of London.

"I apologize for claiming even ten minutes of your time, Dick, but I want to talk to you about business. Have you any objection to making some more money! Or have you sufficient already!"

"Refusing money has never been one of my sins, Sally."

"I know. People tell me that, outside of Isobel, you haven't a single human feeling! And why should you have! If people get ill they should pay to get well. I'm never ill, but if I were I should certainly call you in, Dick. And now let me tell you what is in my mind. I'm proposing to start a nursing-home—no, don't interrupt, please—in this neighbourhood and, as the charges will be simply terrific, I suppose, in common fairness, that I must get some doctors with names. You are the biggest nerve-specialist in London now, and—what would be your fee, as consulting neurologist! If you're too busy, or too bored, or you would like to be rude on general principles, just say so and I'll send you straight home to that perfectly adorable wife of yours. By the way, how is Isobel? She always looks the happiest woman in London, but I haven't seen her lately."

"She's perfectly fit, Sally, thanks." Wingate's

tone was cordial; it pleased him to hear people praise his wife. Isobel was worth all the admiration that was so freely given her by her friends.

"You haven't told me your decision. But first of all, what do you think of my idea?"

"There are a great many nursing-homes already, Sally. Not that I want to pour cold water——"

"You couldn't possibly do that, however hard you tried," was the sharp reply; "you ought to know me well enough by this time, Richard, to realize that when I once make up my mind—As a matter of fact," she hastened to explain, "I still have quite a lot of money and I want to do something with it."

Wingate laughed.

"That isn't the truth—or, at least, only part of the truth. Who are you trying to help this time, Sally?"

"What a ruthless creature you are! I believe you wouldn't change your tone a bit even if you were going to give me a death-sentence. Well, I will be frank with you, Dick!"

"Good! I like frankness." He leaned towards her, smiling.

"Humph! Let me tell you, as one who has lived a great many more years than you have, that frankness is sometimes a very dreadful thing. However, I happen to possess a young friend—sex, female, very pretty, quite charming—she is the modern type who is not content to sit 'idly

by with folded hands' (who was it wrote that ?), but wants to do some work in the world. She's my niece, if you must know."

"Why doesn't she get married ?"

Lady Sally puckered her forehead.

"I dunno. Never asked her. She's been travelling for a good many years. Now you come to mention it, I think perhaps I had better get her married; she's much too pretty to go about flattering men's susceptible hearts. But in the meantime I intend to start this nursing-home."

"For her ?"

"In a measure—yes. She's had wonderful experience as a nurse, I believe—served during the latter years of the war, when she was quite a child—and been all over the world since. There's no doubt about it, her references are exceptional. Don't ask me why such a girl should spend her life that way—she likes it, I suppose."

"She nursed during the war, did you say ?" repeated Wingate. The words had had a powerful effect upon him. Lady Sarah Doone noticed that his whole demeanour was changed; that the smile had gone from his face and that he had an air of alertness. An apprehensive alertness, as though some long-dormant memory-cells had been disturbed.

"I'm sorry," said Lady Sally, forming for once a wrong conclusion, "you went through Hell there yourself, I remember."

"Oh! it's all right—I gained wonderful experience." Had he not got a grip on himself, he would have burst into a laugh that, if it had not frightened his hostess, would certainly have astonished her.

"Perhaps you met out there?"

He pulled himself up short.

"Met?" he said jerkily, "met—whom?"

"Fay Dennison!" replied Lady Sally.

And then Wingate did laugh.

III

Ten minutes later, as he left the house, he cursed himself for having been such a clumsy fool. It was that swift, unexpected, and merciless stab of memory, coming on top of his mood of rebellion that morning, which had made him temporarily lose control. The desire to laugh had been irresistible, and he had yielded to it.

It was seeing the sharp, intelligent eyes of Lady Sally looking speculatively at him that recalled him to his senses. He had committed a terrible blunder and must endeavour to repair the damage.

"You had such an air of mystery—as though you were trying to find out the secret places of my life," he heard himself explaining—it must have sounded pretty lame, but he could not help that. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I did meet a Miss Dennison during the last year of the war. She

was very young to be 'out', but wonderfully plucky."

"That would be Fay," replied Lady Sally. She seemed about to add something to this confirmatory remark, but quickly changed her tone.

"I don't want to rush you into anything like this, Dick," she said; "as I have told you, I am keen on the nursing-home scheme—as a matter of fact, my solicitors have already bought the premises—and I should like you to be the consultant-neurologist if you can find time to fit it in. You can ask any figure in reason. No, don't answer now; think it over, see how you are fixed, and ring me up this evening. . . . Sure you won't stay to lunch? . . . But I know how disappointed Isobel would be, so I won't press you."

After that he had found himself out on the pavement.

How far had he betrayed himself?

IV

Amongst her small but exclusive circle Isobel Wingate was known as "Isobel, the Immaculate". Even to her woman friends—and amongst them were at least three who cried in their bedrooms on the night they heard of Richard Wingate's engagement—she was acclaimed a model wife. Much of her distinguished husband's success was put down

to her credit: Isobel was a wonderful hostess; she never made an enemy, and her small house in Hamilton Circus was an ideal of what a busy man's home should be.

"She spoils him," said some.

"He's worth spoiling," replied others—"and anyway, they're the happiest couple in London, aren't they?"

After that the conversation, so far as argument was concerned, languished. No one had any possible doubt about Isobel and Dick Wingate being the happiest married couple of their acquaintance.

Isobel herself thought this. Day after day she marvelled at her happiness and rendered thanks for it. That happiness could never be taken from her. Dick and she had founded their married life upon a rock—the rock of true and unselfish love. And, in all the world, there was not another man like Dick. He was strong and steadfast: no wonder he had been so successful.

It was time now he was home for lunch. Instinctively she went to the mirror; she wanted to be assured that she was worth her husband's attention.

With the pleasure of a child she smiled at the reflection, for she decided that she was looking unusually well that morning. The glass showed her a small, oval, piquant face, pretty, and yet made distinctive by the delicately chiselled features, a mouth so sensitively shaped that it became

beautiful, large eyes which now were limpid with innocent joy; the curve of a white, stately neck.

"Dick, I do love you!" she murmured, thankful that all she saw was hers to give.

The telephone rang.

"It's Mr. Wingate, madam."

Her heart was throbbing as she took the receiver.

"Yes, dear?" A pause. Then, much more slowly: "Oh, I'm sorry. But you'll be back by six? Good-bye, dear."

She stood by the hall table in an attitude of deep reflection for some moments after replacing the receiver. Something was worrying her. She had an expression of wistful wonder as though she had been unexpectedly hurt.

Then she went in to lunch.

But all through the meal she could not forget her husband's voice as it had come to her over the wire. It had sounded harsh, unnatural, almost —there was a fluttering of her heart—cruel! Why should Dick wish to be cruel?

As swiftly as the sun is blotted out by a cloud, the sense of joy left her. Dick had not been his usual self that morning after breakfast. He had seemed so impatient that he could hardly wait for her kiss. Of course, he had explained it—he had an exceptionally heavy day ahead and he was very worried about a couple of cases. Isobel considered this, and smiled. Dear old Dick! That, of course, was the reason why he had

sounded so grumpy over the phone. Of course ! . . .

But again she stopped eating—and this time she pushed the plate away. She had lost her appetite.

For the second time within a few minutes that expression of wistful wonder, of innocent perplexity, came into her face. It seemed absurd, but could Dick possibly have had another reason ? Was it something apart from pressure of appointments which had kept him from coming home to lunch that day ? A feeling of impending disaster, of terrible trouble, came over her.

There was only one small cloud on the horizon of their happiness, and that wasn't her fault. In spite of the many reassurances he had given her, was Dick really disappointed, so disappointed that— ? Her body shook at that thought. If Dick ever stopped loving her she would die. He was her all, and without his love she could not live.

The telephone broke in upon her thoughts.

"Oh, it's you, Selby !" she exclaimed. To hear the quiet, chuckling voice of the man who was Dick's closest friend, the man who had saved Dick's life during the war, was a wonderful comfort in that moment.

Selby Fowne explained that he had just rung up to inquire if a certain favourite dish of his was "on board" that night ?

"Yes—you dear !—of course it is ! By the way, Selby, that husband of mine hasn't come home to

lunch to-day. I hope he hasn't been getting into any mischief?"

The answer came pat.

"The marvel to me is that he can find time to eat at all! Do you realize, Isobel, that you are married to a very famous man?"

"Of course, I do! But he ought to come home to lunch!"

Fowne chuckled.

"How like a woman! But no wonder everybody calls you a model wife, Isobel! Dick is a lucky devil!"

She seized on the last words.

"Do you mean that, Selby? Do you really think so? Tell me!"

There was a momentary pause, and then she heard Fowne's voice again: "You wait until I see you to-night and I'll tell you a lot of things, young woman! In the meantime, it may relieve your absurd misgivings somewhat to know that Dick is fiendishly busy to-day and is having a frugal chop at Harley Street."

"Selby, you're a wonderful friend! You're always on hand whenever I am in trouble!" Isobel spoke fervently, and the words came from her heart. This man, from the first day of her marriage, had been like a brick of a brother to her.

"Oh—that's all right," she heard Selby Fowne reply, rather confusedly, and then: "To-night, then!"

She rang off, feeling that she was a very stupid person to have had any misgivings. Had she been married to the ordinary man she might have felt justified in worrying, but with Dick her doubt had represented disloyalty.

"I'll make it up to him to-night," she promised herself, and blew her husband's photograph a kiss.

V

In the meantime Richard Wingate was lunching in Soho. Over the telephone Selby Fowne had said that the specialist was having a chop in his Harley Street consulting-rooms. As Wingate had not gone home, and as he knew him to be exceptionally busy, Fowne had jumped to a conclusion. Moreover, he wanted to keep Isobel's mind free from the slightest worry. As a loyal and true friend of Isobel's, that was always his wish. Selby Fowne didn't know the truth.

And the truth was that Wingate was lunching at Gustave's in Greek Street. The place was quiet and select, the food exceptionally good. When he wished to be alone with his thoughts, Wingate often went there. Of late he had been rather a frequent visitor.

Leaving Lady Sarah Doone's, he had felt it impossible to go home. After the news he had been given—Fay Dennison back in London!—he wanted to be alone. Any company would have

jarred—been impossible. He could not have tolerated even Selby Fowne.

As for Isobel—he could not face her. Not that he had anything shameful in his mind, but—he acknowledged the truth, harshly revealing as it was—he did not want to see Isobel. Not now, at any rate; not until he had had time to think things out and to get a better grip on himself. At the present time he was all to pieces.

Fay Dennison . . . !

What searing memories the very name conjured up! What agonies of longing, what sternly fought madnesses! In the quiet corner of the restful restaurant Wingate saw the girl as plainly as he had seen her that day eight years ago—a face whose beauty caught one's breath; the cloud of raven-black hair which in those days had been its glorious frame; the young, exquisitely-shaped, supple body whose intoxicating graces even the matter-of-fact nurse's costume could not disguise.

"Hell!" snapped the man who, only a few hours before, had been called a machine.

He felt his heart was being squeezed by a pair of ruthless, giant hands, so great was the pain. He had married Isobel Dellairs, loved her, loved her still—but Fay Dennison. . . .

His mind went back to the fierce, throbbing, never-to-be-forgotten war years—when men lived, even if they died. He saw the sights that had been burnt into his brain, smelt the pungent

smells, recalled the hectic scraps of talk. True, he had suffered Hades himself, but it was in France that he had met the girl who had inflamed his blood like an intoxicating wine. Eighteen she was—and, in his eyes, the most beautiful, the most desirable, the most rapturous thing that God had ever created. He had known all through his married life that he could never forget her, but he had not anticipated that he would ever see her again.

He had fallen in love with her instantly. As he worked in the advance dressing-stations he had had one prayer: that they might both be spared, or alternatively, that they might die together, by the same shell if possible.

Fay had returned his love. He was sure of that. The night that she had kissed him, outside Rouen! Burning, passionate love had been in that kiss. Her lips had quivered when she whispered: "Dick! I must have lived all my life for this!"

Yet—the amazing perplexities of women!—she had refused to marry him. Her reasons had been incoherent, preposterously ridiculous. She was too young . . . loved nursing . . . wanted her freedom even though she loved him. . . .

He had tried to argue with her. All the way home on leave he had endeavoured to make her see reason. It had been maddening: he wondered how he had kept his head.

And then, when they reached London on leave, the girl had stopped the taxi and slipped out to make a purchase.

She did not come back—and he had not seen her since.

Now—— ?

He knew that his love for Fay Dennison was as strong as ever; all through the years it had merely been slumbering. An honest man, he admitted that it had only required the mention of her name to send his senses rioting.

And when he met her ?

He *must* meet her !

To know that Fay was in London, that he had the chance to see her, sent the blood racing through him in a mad, intolerant flood.

He had an overwhelming desire to go back to Brook Street and ask Lady Sally where Fay could be found. Wonderful thought ! Within a few minutes, perhaps, he could be looking into her eyes. . . .

"M'sieur desires ?"

"Get me a taxi, Gustave !"

VI

Back at Harley Street calmer thoughts came. If he accepted the post at the new nursing-home, he would see Fay frequently, every day. . . . Yet he must be discreet, circumspect. Lady Sally

was an uncannily clever woman. Perhaps she had guessed something already. It was imperative that he should be careful.

This thought sobered Wingate still more. An extraordinary chance had brought Fay Dennison back to his life, but Isobel must be shielded. Isobel had been wonderful, and he must protect her as well as he could. She must be hurt as little as possible; not at all if it could be avoided.

But he would have to see Fay. That tumult in his heart could not be stilled. Only that morning he had been thinking of her again, longing for her afresh—and now she had come back to him. Only that morning he had felt how empty his life really was, and now . . .

Fay Dennison was in London!

He would not allow her to escape this time.

He still sat at his table. Once again the pendulum had swung and the mental picture he now had was of his wife. He knew the danger of accepting the offer which Lady Sally had made him. Yet—and he was now regarding the matter from a business point of view—he did not intend to neglect this fresh opportunity. By economizing his time and working a little harder, he could fit this new activity in. This axiom of never neglecting a chance had become part of his professional life; upon it he had built up a great deal of his success.

Then there was the question of Lady Sally's

personal friendship. Lady Sally had been wondrously kind to Isobel and himself. She had counted on him taking the appointment. He could not let her down.

He sat weighing up the question coldly, logically.

Then he telephoned to Brook Street—saying that he would be pleased to accept.

VII

Wingate, entering his house in Hamilton Circus that evening, had the feeling that he must be on his guard. Schooling his features, he went upstairs.

"Dick!"

Isobel was dressing. He caught a glimpse of her in a charming *négligée*. At any other time the sight would have stirred him: it did not now. Isobel was charming, and his wife with whom he had lived five happy, if uneventful, years, but at that moment she might have been a stranger. The kiss she gave him was the proffered gift of a tender, loving heart—but as he accepted it, his thoughts were of the girl he had kissed outside Rouen eight years before. The kiss which Fay Dennison had given him in return had had a tang. It had filled him with a wild ecstasy, a passionate desire to live, and to extract all there was out of life.

"You're an awfully bad boy! Why didn't you come home to lunch?"

"I was too busy, dear." He had to lie. Indeed, so swiftly had the pendulum swung again, his chief thought now was not of Fay Dennison but of this adoring, solicitous wife who had to be shielded.

"Yet you went to Brook Street."

He started, but Isobel seemed merely to be having a joke with him.

"Yes, I managed to give Lady Sally five minutes. It was a business call. She's—she's starting a nursing-home above all things—can you imagine Lady Sally walking through the wards and inquiring if the dear patients are perfectly comfortable?—and she asked me to take on a job in connection with it."

"Consultant?"

"Yes." He laughed. "And I can name my own fee! How much do you think I ought to rush her, Isobel?"

She looked at him rather curiously.

"Will you be able to fit it in with all your other work, Dick? You mustn't overdo things, you know."

He felt himself becoming confused and laughed to regain control.

"It would be foolish to refuse this opportunity; besides, naturally, I want to oblige Sally."

"Oh, of course, dear." She turned away.

He bit his lip.

"Are you all right, Isobel?"

"Quite!" She smiled constrainedly. "Why do you ask?"

Wingate sought refuge in husbandly vagueness.

"Oh, I don't know. No particular reason. Only you seemed a wee bit tired." Anxious, he stepped up to her. "Been a long day, darling?"

The touch of his hand made her turn to him.

"Every day is frightfully long, Dick, when I don't see you. Does that sound awfully silly after five years of marriage?" Colour had come into her cheeks, and her eyes sought his anxiously.

"It sounds rather complimentary," Wingate replied. What a hellish mess Life could suddenly become.

But she would not be put off.

"Dick, have you ever regretted marrying me?"

This time his concern was very real.

"Isobel! What a question! Of course, I have never regretted it! Why be so absurd?" He held out both arms and caught her.

"What's the trouble, darling? You know you always tell me."

She rested her fair head on his shoulder.

"If you tell me you love me, everything will be all right, Dick."

"Love you! Why, of course I love you! Aren't you my wife?"

"Kiss me, then."

He bent down. Her lips clung to his.

"And you will always love me?"

What had upset her? Not the simple fact that he had missed coming home to lunch, surely? That was too ridiculous! Her woman's intuition? It might be that. The position was rapidly becoming impossible, and he must smooth it out.

"Many men would be only too thankful to have my chance!" he laughed.

"Other men! There is only you, Dick! There will always be only you! Don't you realize that?"

He became more embarrassed.

"This is silly, dear! Of course, I realize it. And I'm thankful. But now I must dress."

She watched him go, eyes bright with unshed tears. That mysterious power of intuition which Nature gives to women seemed to be sending her a warning that her precious world of happiness was in danger of crumbling. On the surface she had very little to go upon—but small, apparently insignificant signs can loom as large as fiery danger-signals to a woman in love.

Five minutes' resolution, and she became outwardly her usual self, tapping at her husband's dressing-room door and inquiring if "he could manage".

"Come in, dear," came the drawl.

So big, so strong, so handsome—and so lovable! Her heart gave a fresh leap as she looked at him.

Wingate smiled at her.

"You're not going to be silly any more? Promise me!"

With his arms about her like that, she fought down the fears which Lady Sally's mysterious hints had given her a few hours before.

"It was silly, I know, Dick!" she said promising.

Downstairs, looking at her well-appointed table, her beautiful dining-room, she felt more assured. She had helped Dick build that nest. United they had passed successfully, triumphantly, through the most dangerous period of marriage—the first three testing years. From the first, nothing had come to mar their happiness. Whilst Dick had battled in the world, she had worked in the home—the home which so many people said she had made the most delightful in London.

It would take a great deal, she reflected, to cast a shadow upon that home. The thought was strengthening and consoling.

"Mr. Selby Fowne."

She hastened to meet her favourite guest, and gave him both her hands.

"Selby! It *is* good to see you again!"

"And a better sight than you, Isobel, never gladdened the eyes of man! There! I wanted to tell you that over the phone to-day, but thought someone might be listening to pass it on to your brute of a husband, who would sure to be frantically jealous. Where is Dick, by the way?"

"He'll be down in a minute. Have you heard the news?"

"Another triumph for the all-conquering consultant?"

"Yes. Lady Sally Doone is starting a wonderful new nursing-home, and she has asked Dick to fix his own fee to act as consultant."

"The man positively mints money! But good for you, Isobel. I should stick him for a new set of sables!"

"I think I will." She stopped, suddenly thoughtful, grave on the instant.

"Selby, will you tell me something?"

This good and faithful friend wondered at the seriousness in her face.

"Anything that will be for your good, my dear," he replied slowly.

"I don't know whether this is for my good, Selby, but you must please tell me all the same."

Selby Fowne straightened his tie.

"H'm! Well, suppose you fire away?"

She looked round and then put her hand on his arm.

"Selby, who is Fay Dennison?"

Instantly something of the truth which she had dimly feared was revealed to her. Selby Fowne had frowned, and then, through the mirror on the wall, she saw her husband's face.

It was pale and strained.

CHAPTER II

APPROACHING THE BATTLE-LINE

I

"HULLO, Dick! Here's Isobel asking who a Miss Fay Dennison is! Seems to me I have heard the name before. Let me see now, where was it and in what connection? I wish I hadn't such a rotten memory!"

Wingate joined them. Fowne's strategy had given him time to compose himself. He heard himself saying: "Miss Fay Dennison? Why, that was the name of the nurse who worked with us in '18, surely, Selby! Rather a pretty girl, if I remember rightly. And, oh, I've got it now! . . . Lady Sally told me to-day that a Miss Fay Dennison would be connected with this new nursing-home she intends starting. Where have you heard of her, Isobel?" Unconsciously his voice had hardened.

Isobel laughed.

"I haven't had time to tell you, Dick, but Lady Sally called this afternoon. When she asked me, rather too casually, I thought, if I had ever heard you speak of a girl named Fay Dennison—yes, now I come to think of it, Sally

did say that she had been a nurse during the war—I wondered whether I ought to be jealous ? I knew Selby would tell me—so I asked him. Do you mind ?"

Wingate was not quite satisfied with his wife's tone, but she had given him a lead and he must play up to it.

"Lady Sally is a shocking scandalmonger ! The next time I see her she will be severely warned not to put stupid notions into my wife's head !"

"As though I should let her !" Isobel said gaily—rather too gaily Selby Fowne, who was feeling uncomfortable, decided.

"You would be very silly if you allowed anyone to do that, Isobel," he said ; "but"—rubbing his hands—"what about dinner ? Are you both willing to see me drop in sheer exhaustion ?"

They went in.

"Aren't you curious to know all about Dick's new post, Selby ?"

Fowne lifted an admonishing finger.

"As a medical man I never let anything interfere with my steady eating, Isobel ! Isn't that good advice, Dick ?"

"Excellent," was the brief reply.

Isobel looked across at her husband. Her nerves jumpy, she was not reassured by the expression on Dick's face. Her husband still had a strained look, but when he caught her eye, this vanished.

"I think we have been living too stodgy a life lately," Wingate said; "what about a theatre one night and supper at the Embassy?"

"Excellent!" agreed Fowne; "my company manners are deplorable, but can I count myself in?"

Isobel smiled across at him.

"Of course! When Dick gets tired of me, I shall palm myself off on you, Selby! I suppose you already know that?"

"Rather!" laughed the practitioner; "you'd better look out, Dick!"

"The poor husband isn't usually warned, is he?" countered Wingate, smiling; "but still, thanks for the tip!"

After that Selby Fowne skilfully led the conversation away from this danger-zone. Thunder was in the air, and he endeavoured, like the good fellow he was, to disperse it. He had to do the bulk of the talking, but he had the satisfaction of seeing both his friends become more natural in their demeanour as the meal progressed.

Still, it was not a happy evening. When he thought of the nights he had spent in this house in the past he felt like cursing Sally Doone. Why had she brought Fay Dennison back into Dick's life? And why had she been such a fool as to talk to Isobel about the girl?

He seized the chance of a few minutes' private talk with Wingate towards the end of the evening

to break an unwritten law amongst men. He hated to do it, but the expression he had seen in Isobel's eyes forced his hand.

"None of my business, Dick, but—well, frankly, do you think you ought to take on that job with Lady Sally?"

Wingate looked from the tip of the cigar he was smoking to the face of his best friend.

"Exactly what do you mean by that, Selby?" His tone was not friendly.

Fowne was forced to take the hint. Next to the esteem of Isobel Wingate he valued the friendship of this man more than anything else in his life.

"I'm sorry, old chap," he replied, shrugging his shoulders; "but—I'm very fond of you, Dick! Should hate for anything to happen——"

Wingate cut him short.

"Nothing will happen!" he said decisively. "Any mention of the war is taboo in this house after to-night."

"I understand," said Fowne.

II

Wingate meant what he said. The realization of all that would be involved had come as a staggering shock to him as he sat at dinner that night. He would be estranged from his best friend—and he would lose Isobel, the finest wife ever

given to man. He would be worse than a fool to allow anything to mar the companionship which had been perfect for so many years. When he met Fay, he would have to treat her as a stranger, as a woman in whom interest had died years before. If he did that, he would be safe. It was unlikely that she would wish to revive what must be an unpleasant memory—especially when she knew that he was married.

He felt thankful that he had been able to come to this resolve, which he determined to keep.

"I'll be home for lunch for certain to-day, darling!" he told Isobel, as he kissed her after breakfast the next morning. He caught her to him as though anxious that her pure, unselfish, and steadfast love might act as a shield against wild and rebellious thoughts.

"Nothing's ever going to come between us, old girl," he said, and her body quivered in his arms as she replied: "Oh, Dick, I love you so!"

He left the house fully armed. At least, so he thought. But when, during the morning, he heard Lady Sally's voice say over the telephone: "If you have time, Dick, I want you to come to Brook Street before lunch—Miss Dennison is anxious to meet you," he realized that his defences were not so strong after all. The mere mention of the name had set his temples throbbing.

Anxious to meet him? What was meant by that? Before he could fit himself for the battle

he must know exactly the extent of the danger with which he would be faced. If Fay hadn't forgotten, if she told him that for her, as for him, those eight years had been years in which memory had stabbed and seared . . . what could he do then?

III

"This is Mr. Wingate, Fay."

He heard Lady Sally's voice but faintly. All his faculties were trained on the woman by her side—the woman whose smile sought out the secret places of his heart and warmed him through and through.

This was the same Fay—older-looking, of course, grown into a woman, and, because of that, more fascinating, and—he realized it at once—even more dangerous to him than the girl whose kiss outside Rouen had sent his blood into a glow.

"We've met before, haven't we, Mr. Wingate? Or have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten, Miss Dennison." He kept a firm hold on his voice because he realized that Lady Sally was regarding him intently. "And so you are still keen on nursing?" he added, anxious to make this first meeting appear as conventional as possible.

"Yes." Her voice was clear, still young, and held the old magic buoyancy. It thrilled him

just to hear it. "You wouldn't be anything but a doctor, would you, Mr. Wingate?" she asked with a little challenge.

"No, I don't think I would."

"And I wouldn't be anything but a nurse."

Wingate smiled.

"You'll be something vastly more important than an ordinary nurse in this nursing-home—promise you will be lenient with me!"

Colour crept into her cheeks.

"I can promise you that straight away, Mr. Wingate." Her tone was kind.

"And now if you two have finished exchanging compliments," broke in Lady Sally, "perhaps you will accompany me to the nursing-home itself. The architect has promised to meet us—and I want you to have a talk with him, Dick. Frighten him, if you can; he's rather an autocratic person."

"Architects usually are," said Wingate.

"And aren't famous nerve specialists?" remarked Fay Dennison, smiling, as he opened the door.

"One I know can be a very submissive creature," he replied, responding to the look she gave him.

As she passed, a faint wave of perfume was diffused. It served to remind him afresh of hidden danger.

An hour passed in the inspection of the premises. During the time he spoke to the architect his mind was wandering—roaming in realms which he knew to be forbidden.

"You'll come with us, Mr. Wingate—Auntie is taking me to Fabiano's for lunch?"

It was a temptation—but it had to be crushed.

"Thanks, but I promised my wife to be home to lunch."

While Fay Dennison's eyes registered something else, her lips parted in a smile.

"Of course! I forgot for the moment that you were married——"

"I told you yesterday, Fay," said Lady Sally.

"But, you see, darling, it's at least eight years since I last saw Mr. Wingate, and he was not married then. Do forgive me! Goodbye!"

"I shall be seeing you again soon," he replied, as his hands closed over hers.

"Of course! There will be so much to talk about! And then—in the near future—we are to be colleagues. So *au revoir*, Mr. Wingate!"

She seemed to be laughing at him. Why? What had been her feeling when she heard that he was married? The inscrutability of women! He could not tell from her face—but certainly he had the impression that she had gently scoffed at him.

Then the Rolls glided away, and he was left alone.

Luncheon that day at Hamilton Circus was a rather silent meal. Isobel took her cue from her husband.

IV

"Well, what do you think of him?" inquired Lady Sally. She looked at the younger woman, whom she decided was a very radiant companion, with a tensity of expression.

"I think he is one of the most interesting men I have ever met," replied Fay. She had prepared herself for the cross-examination which she felt was inevitable.

Lady Sally arranged her furs.

"You have been away, my dear, or you would know that Dick Wingate is one of the most fortunate men in London. He married a charming girl five years ago, and they are perfectly happy."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because I think you ought to know, my dear. You would get to know in any case very soon."

"And why do you think I ought to know?"

Lady Sally ignored the question by asking one herself.

"You are a very beautiful woman, Fay. Eight years ago you must have been equally—desirable. A man is a man, and Dick Wingate had not met Isobel then: was there anything between you eight years ago?"

Her companion stifled an exclamation.

"Why should you ask?" she said.

"Because—forgive me, but I have a very real

regard for Dick and Isobel's happiness—when I mentioned your name to Dick yesterday, I saw him flinch. I hope you can trust me to be discreet, my dear," Lady Sally went on in a tone surprisingly gentle.

"We were friends, Mr. Wingate and I."

"Only friends?"

"Only friends." The words were uttered slowly, as though the speaker had to drag them out. Fay Dennison was thinking of the chance she had had to claim this man for her own—and how, like a fool, she had let it slip. Now it was too late: another woman had gained the prize, while she was outside the gate, which was barred and bolted against her.

A hand touched her arm.

"I am going to take an old woman's privilege, Fay," said Lady Sally, and her voice now was serious, almost grave: "I should not have asked Dick Wingate to have had any connection with the nursing-home if I had known that there was the least chance of the post causing him any anxiety. Happiness such as I know exists at the present time in Dick Wingate's married life is too precious, too beautiful, too rare, to be trifled with. That is why I am speaking to you like this. Perhaps if you weren't so distractingly lovely a person I should not bother. And now," her tone changing, "if you feel you want to blow my head off, please do it before we get

out of the car, because we are nearly at the restaurant."

Fay remained silent.

Like the luncheon at Hamilton Circus, the meal at Fabiano's was not a sparkling affair.

The rest of the day dragged, and at ten o'clock Fay made an excuse to her aunt and went to her room. The mental turmoil of the day had been fatiguing and she was tired. But, above all, she wanted to think. And, with Aunt Sally's sharp eyes upon her, coherent thought had been impossible.

She undressed quickly and got into bed. The darkness was friendly: it shrouded her mercifully.

Because of the hunger in her soul, she lived over again every moment of the time she had been with Dick Wingate that day. Had he changed? Was he the same man she had known eight years before? His manner had been constrained, but that might have been due to nerves: it must have been a shock to him to meet again the girl who——

She herself had not changed. Only Time had brought its punishment. Eight years before she had been afraid . . . she was so young . . . and Dick might have been led away by the hectic conditions under which he lived and worked. . . . Marriage was for life: it was such a serious thing. She loved him too dearly, too whole-

heartedly, to be able to think of his ever repenting his tempestuous rashness. She was clear-headed enough even then, and amongst her friends at home were many who had made disastrous war-marriages. It was the horror of Dick making a mistake that forced her to refuse him when he asked her to be his wife. Rather than that, loving him with all her soul, she had brought herself to offer . . . But, in the taxi on the way to the hotel, her courage suddenly faltered; she realized she was about to kill the love she bore the man . . . and when she was once away, she knew she could never go back to him. By her action she had killed his love with a sharp, avenging sword.

She had thought she would never see Dick Wingate again—that was to be her punishment, first, for being a coward, and then for tarnishing herself in his eyes—and so she had travelled incessantly for several years—and always away from England.

They had been years crammed with experience. Naturally she had met many men. But they all served to throw up in stronger relief the man she was unable to forget.

In her breast now was born a pain poignantly sharp. Love, that terrible, potent force which made a woman's life either a paradise or a desert, was mocking her. She had thrown her chance of wonderful happiness away, and having done

so, had tried to fight her weakness and conquer it. But directly she saw Dick Wingate that day, the eight-years-old regret increased in strength. It seemed that she and Dick were standing alone in the world in that Brook Street room and that no one else counted. She could remember every inflection of his voice, recall every expression in his eyes. What had been the thoughts behind those eyes? Did he remember with a hundredth part of the pain it gave her?

How vain were her regrets! Dick was married —wonderfully married, Lady Sally said. Another woman was in the paradise which she might have possessed for herself.

There had been no mistaking Lady Sally's hint: she must not entertain any idea of intruding into that intimate kingdom of happiness. She was warned to keep away: trespassers would be prosecuted.

Of course, she would not attempt to intrude. Dick Wingate's life was bounded now by another woman who loved him, who had helped to build up his life and home, and to whom he must represent the whole world and the glory thereof.

Yet——

Burying her face in the pillow, Fay Dennison sobbed.

"Dick, you belong to me!" she whispered fiercely; "you belong to me!"

CHAPTER III

LITTLE DEVIL DOUBT

I

ALL her friends said that Lady Sally's dinner-parties were unique. Certainly the food was always super-excellent and the company exceptionally well-chosen. Invitations were never refused.

Isobel Wingate dressed with unusual care this night. The explanations which Selby Fowne and her husband had given her of the mysterious Fay Dennison had not been entirely satisfactory. All that she had elicited from both was that Fay Dennison was the name of a girl who had nursed in the war and worked with Dick during 1918. That might mean nothing or it might mean a lot. Now she was going to see the woman for herself, and she wanted to look her best.

She had chaffed Dick about having been in love with his "Fay" who was said to be so attractive, but her husband had replied rather snappily.

"For God's sake don't rag, old girl!" had been his answer. "I don't know what's the matter with you lately!"

She had had to leave it at that. Even her tried and trusted friend, Selby Fowne, could not help her—or would not. When she had referred to the subject again, Fowne had looked hard and earnestly at her and said: "Doubt is a dreadful little devil, Isobel! Turn him out!" Did he mean that as a reproach, or was it true that men who were real friends never gave anything away about each other?

But to-night she was going to see the woman herself. She would have an opportunity of watching Fay Dennison and Dick together, and she could tell if there was any need for doubt. Courageous, and a thoroughbred, Isobel preferred the firing-line to the entrenchments. Now that her sixth sense had warned her of possible danger, she wanted to be in the battle zone.

The astonishing thing to Isobel was that, when she met Fay Dennison an hour later, she liked her. She acknowledged the other woman's extreme attractiveness at once, and saw instantly that she was refined, cultured, and well-bred. Whereas she had come certainly to adjudge, possibly to dislike, conceivably to hate, she now found herself admiring. What a capacity this woman would have for love, she told herself, and with that, obeying an unconscious prompting which she could not control, Isobel glanced over at her husband.

Dick was standing alone, and was looking at Fay Dennison and herself with an expression

which was puzzling and yet half-divulging. He seemed to be comparing them.

Isobel knew that they made a striking contrast, for Fay Dennison was dark and she was fair; Fay was vivacious whereas she was controlled, except when someone she liked very much was near. Fay Dennison, too, was more individual in her dress—the frock she was wearing that night was somewhat daringly cut, revealing rather more of neck and shoulders than she herself would have cared to show. Yet Isobel acknowledged that the other overstepped no mark of good taste in wearing this gown: it fitted in with her style, expressed admiringly her striking individuality. It was part of her.

Fay Dennison was a year younger than herself, she remembered, and she looked the type who would never grow old. She apparently had an inexhaustible vitality which, feeding her quite remarkable beauty, made her doubly attractive.

Why had she never married? Would Selby Fowne do? What did he think of her? Selby had known her in France. What was the mystery behind this woman? There must be some secret; she looked a woman who had a past in her life . . . behind her sparkling vivacity there seemed a suggestion of shadows, of . . . tears.

Fay Dennison smiled, showing perfect teeth.

"I am told that you are the happiest woman in London, Mrs. Wingate."

"Isn't that rather a great deal to say? In spite of the newspaper articles, there must be a tremendous number of happy women in London. At least, I hope so."

"And yet it has been my experience that the really happy woman is very rare, Mrs. Wingate —that is why I congratulate and—may I say it? —envy you!"

"Tut, tut, Fay," said a voice, and Selby Fowne's round, comfortable face smiled. "It's not Isobel here who's to be envied—it's that brute of a husband of hers! Look at him, well-fed, well-clothed, looking so dashed sure of himself! All due to Isobel here. She's the business into which Wingate has put his money, and it's paying him something like three thousand per cent."

"Dick!" Isobel called, after laughing at the outburst, "do come!"

Wingate sauntered across.

"I want Miss Dennison to tell me if she thinks you look the part."

"What part?" Wingate asked sharply. He seemed rather on edge.

"The part Selby has given to you—that of the perfectly contented husband." Behind her Isobel heard Fowne cough.

Fay Dennison laughed, giving Wingate a frank scrutiny.

"May I say that I think he is a tremendous credit to you, Mrs. Wingate?" she said.

"That's very nice of you. You met Dick years ago, I hear—do you think he has changed much?"

Fay turned to look at Wingate again. Their eyes met.

Then the reply came with rather elaborate carelessness: "The war changed so many people, didn't it, Mrs. Wingate? Your husband looks older, of course—but I haven't seen enough of him yet to be able to say if he has changed from the man I knew in 1918."

She turned away to be introduced to another guest, and Isobel flushed The answer had been given in the most courteous of tones, but somewhere in it she had read a rebuke. It was as though Fay Dennison had said: "The present is yours. Be content. Let the past forget itself. It belongs to me."

But had it been forgotten?

During the fish-course, Eva Linguard, a pretty, bird-like woman, wearing enormous tortoise-shell rimmed spectacles, leaned across to Fay Dennison.

"You really ought to write your experiences, Miss Dennison! Haven't you had the most thrilling adventures in all parts of the world?"

Fay smiled.

"I have certainly had experiences, Miss Linguard, but I don't know whether they could rightly be called thrilling."

"But you must have met a lot of interesting people? Fascinating men?"

"Confess, Fay!" urged George Loring, a nephew of Lady Sally's, "who was the lucky devil? I wish to Heaven you'd give me a show! I'd even get into the Sunday newspapers for you, Fay!"

The laughter which greeted the somewhat crude banter was not joined in by Wingate. Noticing his frown, Isobel nervously crumbled her bread.

"Come on, Fay," persisted the asinine George Loring, "who was the lucky man?"

"There was no lucky man, George," she replied very distinctly.

A small dance followed. It was only natural, Isobel supposed, that Dick should like to dance with a girl of Fay Dennison's striking appearance, especially as the two were old friends. She held out her hands to Selby Fowne and smiled across at Fay when they passed.

"Dick isn't looking very well to-night, Selby. He hasn't said anything to me, but do you think he is working too hard?"

Taken off his guard, Fowne replied without measuring his words.

"He should never have taken on this nursing-home work," he replied curtly.

He felt his partner falter, and held her more tightly.

"The fact of the matter is—" he went on, endeavouring to rectify the mistake.

"Yes, Selby?" She was looking up at him, eyes anxious.

"That Dick really must give himself more time to rest. But, Isobel, don't for goodness' sake say anything about my having mentioned it. Dick mustn't get the idea that I am trying to butt into his affairs."

"Of course, Selby, I won't say anything. Is everything all right between you and Dick? Has anything happened? Lately you two haven't seemed quite the same."

Selby Fowne skilfully guided his partner round an awkward corner of the improvised dance-room before answering.

"Of course, nothing's happened," he cheerfully lied. "Dick's my pal, my dear—and always will be."

She smiled with a wistfulness that tore at the heart of this splendid sportsman.

"You won't forget that you are also my friend, Selby? Or don't I count?"

"If there weren't so many people here, I'd—" he threatened. "Let me take you to your husband. Dancing is bad enough for a creature of my weight, without you making me palpitate, Isobel!"

"Seriously, Selby?"

He put a hand on her arm.

"The house of Wingate is run by two partners," he said, "and I am the friend of both. Never forget it!"

II

Dick Wingate sat alone in his study. It was late. His wife had retired a good hour before. He had said he would quickly follow. But he had sat on long after the tobacco in his pipe had turned to ashes.

A resolute yet tense expression came into his face.

He looked at the telephone within hand's-reach, and then took off the receiver.

"Mayfair 5667X."

He waited.

"Fay, I felt I had to say good night! Fay, I must see you—soon, alone! You understand?"

And the reply:

"Oh, my dear!"

Wingate, as the words came faintly to him, felt his temples throb. The pent-up emotion of the last few days caused his voice to shake.

"Fay, you must know what I am feeling! You must realize all that I want to tell you! Say you do!"

"Dick! Ought you to talk to me like this?" Her voice was now just a whisper.

"Don't ask me that! Don't trifle, Fay! All I know is that I must see you—and see you soon! Ever since you came back to me—yes, that is how I like to think of it: you came back to me—I have been utterly restless. Nothing is the same.

I cannot work, and I cannot sleep. My dear, something will have to be done."

There was a pause, and then the voice which thrilled every nerve in him replied:

"But this is madness, dear. Sheer madness. And wrong—utterly wrong! Dick, if I had known, I would not have come back to London."

"But you *have* come! The damage has been done, Fay—and nothing can repair it. Fate did this thing. Listen, Fay. On the morning that Lady Sally first mentioned your name, and when I had not the least idea that you were anywhere in England, I was thinking about you; thinking of that night at Rouen——"

There was a sound of a little stifled sob.

"You are being cruel to me, Dick; very cruel."

He seized on the word.

"Cruel! Cruel!—when I feel I am going mad for want of you! Fay, when will you see me? Some time to-morrow? . . ."

The intensity in his voice made the girl who was listening press a hand to her breast. This was agony; and she could not stand any more.

"Dick, I am going to ring off. I cannot listen to you. It is wrong . . . Your wife . . ." The faltering voice trailed off into nothingness. There was a faint click and then a deep and utter silence.

III

Isobel Wingate found her doubts overwhelming. It was over an hour since she had come up. What was Dick doing? He had promised not to worry about any work that night. A final pipe, he had said.

She looked at the little silver clock on the mantelpiece, one of Dick's early presents to her, and saw that it was a quarter-past one.

Slipping out of bed, she put on a dressing-gown, ran her feet into a pair of blue satin mules, and left the room. At the top of the staircase she hesitated: no sound came to her from below, but yet she had a shattering fear that Dick's study was peopled at that moment by a sinister presence —the ghost of her former happiness.

What could Dick be doing? Why was he staying away so long from her? She knew he was tired—hadn't he said so on the way home? —and, in any case, a pipe did not take more than about twenty minutes to be smoked.

Perhaps, poor boy, he had fallen asleep. He had been working so frightfully hard lately, over-taxing even his wonderful strength.

She went quietly down the stairs, feeling rather more reassured at this thought. That must be the explanation. She would steal in, wake him with a kiss, and then carry him off to bed. A wave of tenderness—had any woman ever more truly

loved her man than she did Dick ?—swept through her.

Noiselessly she turned the handle. Stepping into the room, she saw her husband's back. Dick was seated at his desk on which stood the telephone extension.

He was busy talking to someone, and was so absorbed that he did not realize her presence.

Something forced Isobel not only to stand still but to keep silent.

The conviction came that something dramatic was happening in his life—something vitally important, which she was unable to control, but which was about to sweep her away in a wild, irresistible current.

Dick leaned forward. The movement was characteristic of him when deeply roused.

". . . when will you see me ? Some time to-morrow ?"

The listener caught her breath. Isobel realized that the fear she had had was justified. Moreover, she knew whom the person listening to this passionate appeal must be.

She could not speak. She was unable to make any appeal herself. It was as though she was turned to stone. As she left the room she saw her husband crash the receiver into place and then slump forward in his chair.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOSING BATTLE

I

EVEN in aristocratic Mayfair, the new nursing-home which Lady Sally Doone had started created something of a sensation. The place, when opened, proved to be the last word in equipment and general efficiency. The staff of physicians comprised only the names of famous consultants and surgeons.

The nursing-home was a success from the beginning, and the fact that Wingate was the chief consulting neurologist was acclaimed as a fresh triumph by all Dick's professional friends and colleagues.

None of these—or, at the most, only one—had any idea of the price Wingate paid for the distinction.

Every day as he made his round he was forced to meet Fay Dennison; and the very sight of the girl in her neat uniform was sufficient to throw him off his mental equilibrium for hours.

A week passed in this way, and then Lady Sally called at Harley Street and said in her characteristic brisk manner that she had come to take him back to lunch.

"And if you dare to refuse, Dick, I shall forthwith have to ask you to resign from my nursing-home staff," she added.

Wingate forced himself to smile.

"Your heartlessness is not very convincing," he told her; "do you really wish me to come to lunch?"

Lady Sally's sharp eyes became fixed upon him intently. Wingate felt unable to meet them.

"I insist. I have already rung up Isobel and obtained her permission."

Wingate clenched his hands behind his back. This keen-witted old woman—how much did she guess? The prospective luncheon threatened to be a purgatory.

Yet he had to go through with it. He was forced to act his part. The one consolation was that this sorry farce could not last much longer; there would have to be an end. His nerves were failing.

The food was excellent, and Dick could not help recalling the many happy meals he had had in that same room; but now he felt that every mouthful might choke him. He longed to be out of the house—away from those keen grey eyes which never seemed to be off his face.

It was not until the end of the meal, however, that his hostess turned the current of talk away from the trivialities of the set in which they both moved. Lady Sally now became direct and personal.

"I am worried about you, Dick," she said frankly.

Although he had been preparing himself for just such an ordeal as now loomed ahead, Wingate winced. To cover his uneasiness he lit a cigarette with elaborate care.

"Worried about me, Sally! In the name of goodness, why?" His voice, even to himself, sounded strained. His tone, he felt, would not have deceived a child.

His hostess reached across the table and took his hand.

"Dick," she said, "you are one of my dearest friends. Being not entirely a fool, you must know that for yourself. What is it on your mind?"

Lady Sally had opened fire. Unless he could divert her thoughts, the barrage would be so deadly that he might not be able to stand it.

"I am working rather hard. Beyond that, I am perfectly fit."

The retort was swift and disconcerting.

"You make a very poor liar, Dick. I know I must seem to you a prying old busybody, but, all the same, I think that if you made me your Mother Confessor for once, it would do you all the good in the world. I have been told many secrets in my time. Dick—because I am so fond of you, won't you——?"

He stood up because the very fact of remaining still under this quiet, kindly, but terrible cross-

examination had become impossible. Stooping, he kissed the cheek of his interrogator.

"Sally, you're too imaginative!" He endeavoured to put some raillery into the words, but knew he had signally failed. "I haven't any secrets, but if I had, you would be the first person I should tell them to. And now I must get back to Harley Street—thanks for your kindness. You are really the most lovable person."

All the time he was addressing her, endeavouring to divert her thoughts from the danger-zone, he was acutely conscious that the expression on her wise little face did not change. And when he had come to an end, Lady Sally sighed.

"I want just two more minutes of your time, Dick." She rose, and walked towards him. Although her neat grey head reached only to his shoulder, he was conscious of her dominance.

"I am an old woman, Dick, and I have seen many tragedies in my time. My advice to you is to go away with Isobel for a holiday—take at least a month. Carruthers can do your work at the nursing-home during that time. Good-bye, my dear boy."

Wingate found himself standing on the pavement of Brook Street without realizing exactly how he had got there. He was impatient with himself and with the world; and, in order to relieve this feeling of annoyance, he walked off rapidly to his consulting-rooms. The woman

who watched him sighed again before turning away from the window.

"What a mess life can become," Lady Sally told herself.

II

Hunter, the admirable secretary, received a shock twenty minutes later, when, approaching his employer with a number of letters which he had typed, Wingate waved him aside with a peremptory: "Don't worry me now! I want to be alone!"

"But there are patients, sir. They are expecting to see you. They are here by appointment." Upon the pale, expressive face of the secretary, one emotion pursued another with ludicrous rapidity.

"They must wait."

It was half an hour before Richard Wingate rang his bell. During those thirty minutes he had endeavoured to relax completely. But the advice which he had given to so many nerve-tossed souls he found very difficult to act upon himself.

For the next two hours he sat like a man in a dream, listening to the woes of those who were willing to pay almost any price to get ease from their unrest. Mechanically, he wrote prescriptions, gave counsel, soothed and encouraged those who looked at him with such pitiable pleading; but it

was only through the sternest self-discipline that he was able to carry out his afternoon's work. When Hunter entered with the five-o'clock cup of tea, his nerves were so finely drawn that the secretary had a second unpleasant shock.

"Doctor Selby Fowne has called, sir," he announced.

Wingate smashed his fist on the table.

"I can't see him! I won't be worried! Tell him——"

Then the door opened, and Selby Fowne stepped into the room.

If he had heard anything, he gave no sign. What was more, he appeared to take no notice of the hostile stare given him by his friend.

"Can I beg a cup of tea, Hunter?" When the secretary had gone, he sat down and smiled at Wingate.

"What a day, Dick! Not a breath of air—no wonder you look rather fagged. I felt like dropping myself—that is why I called in to cadge a cup of tea."

No word came from the other. The only sound in the room was the drumming made by Wingate's knuckles on the table.

Hunter entered with the tea.

"Can't you get away, old man? London has become insufferable the last few days. I think of going to Scotland."

There was still no answer.

"Dick, old boy——"

Wingate sprang up.

"Leave me alone, can't you? Everybody is telling me to take a holiday. Sally Doone was on about it at lunch to-day, and now you come offering advice."

The tone was unpleasant—markedly so—but not a muscle of the caller's face moved.

"Easy there, Dick," he replied, with a smile; "working at high pressure in this infernal heat is enough to make a saint swear. Take my tip, and get away."

Putting down his cup, Fowne picked up hat and stick and walked to the door. On the threshold, he paused, and half-turned back.

Wingate had sat down again, but was staring in front of him as though he were alone. With the knuckles of his right hand he still drummed the table.

Selby Fowne, usually the most temperate of men, growled an oath as he left the house. Although the heat was so oppressive that day, it was not the weather that made him so irritable; it was the conviction that the friend he admired so deeply was deliberately heading straight for disaster. The House of Wingate was threatened with ruin, and apparently nothing could save it. Sparing a minute to call at Hamilton Circus that afternoon, he had found Isobel in tears. She had smiled bravely through the mist, but had not confided in him. He knew now the reason: Dick,

the almighty fool, was making shipwreck of his life. As was generally the case, there was another woman—and the other woman, of course, was Fay Dennison.

III

Fay hesitated as she saw Wingate turn the corner. There was a door through which she might have escaped, but before she could turn the handle the nerve specialist had called her.

"Miss Dennison!"

This was not the voice of her lover: it was the voice of the distinguished neurologist to the nursing-home. It was the voice which, professionally, she had to obey.

"Yes, Mr. Wingate?"

A passing Sister, severe in her stiffly starched uniform, smiled as she neared them. These two people represented to Sister Hargreave the last word in efficiency; and she gave them both her unstinted admiration.

"I want to talk to you about the Sanderson case, Miss Dennison; perhaps we might go to your room?"

Her heart failing her—she was afraid to be alone with this man—Fay nodded submissively, and commenced to walk down the corridor. Arrived at her private room, in which the records of the nursing-home were kept, she passed through as Wingate opened the door.

The severely practical atmosphere of the room gave her confidence so long as the nerve specialist dealt technically with the Sanderson case; but her heart gave a fresh leap of alarm as Wingate, stopping suddenly, reached out for her hand.

"Fay! You are torturing me! Have you no pity at all?"

At the strained agony in his voice, she felt stifled. Pity! When every minute that he was in the Home she felt her burden becoming more and more intolerable.

She lifted her head to look at him. He was white, tight-lipped, and there were new lines about his mouth. It was the face of a man who was suffering intensely.

"Dick! I have already told you, you must not talk to me like this. It is wrong. And," her voice rising, "it is so hopeless—so terribly hopeless——"

The hand which he held was raised to his lips.

"It need not be hopeless! It is you who are making it so. All I ask is to see you now and then—to see you alone, so that I can talk to you. I am starving for that—and if you still keep me away, I think I shall go mad!"

She shivered. And then fear was banished by something else: a wave of exultation surged wildly through her: this man, who represented the whole of life, wanted her—wanted her desperately, despairingly. . . .

The wonder of it! Here was a man standing at the very head of his profession, a man of stern self-discipline and rigid control, pleading with passionate ardour. How he must love her! How he had suffered!

The feeling of exultation she had had now changed to pity. This swamped everything else.

"If you need me so badly, Dick, I will meet you—of course, I will meet you."

"Alone? I must have you alone!"

"Yes, we will have dinner in a quiet place, and then we can talk. But, will that satisfy you, Dick?"

"Yes! I swear it! Fay, I reverence you! *You* are sacred to me. Remember that—never doubt it!"

She looked at him bravely now, for their souls were akin. Hands clasped, they read their fate in the other's eyes.

Lost to the outside world, neither heard the first knock on the door. When a more peremptory challenge came, Wingate whispered: "I will telephone—" and then they stood apart.

As the door opened to admit Lady Sally Doone, Wingate, light-hearted now as any schoolboy, said: "I think Sanderson will go on quite nicely, with care." Smiling at Lady Sally, he walked away with a firm and buoyant step.

The visitor regarded the assistant director of her nursing-home keenly.

"Forgive me, my dear——"

Fay flushed vividly. "Mr. Wingate was discussing the Sanderson case with me, Lady Sally."

"So I heard," shrewdly remarked the older woman; "but, in the meantime, the telephone from Harley Street has been ringing furiously for him. My dear—" But Lady Sally, noticing that the girl had turned away, did not complete her sentence. It was, however, with a troubled expression that she, a few minutes later, left the room.

For the rest of the day Fay went about her manifold duties like one walking in her sleep. She had thought—and hoped—that the ceaseless activity of her new life would prove an anodyne. Clean-souled, she knew that she must kill that most precious thing—her love for Richard Wingate. She had bravely attempted to do so, although every sight of the man, every sound of his voice, every mention of his name, inflicted a fresh wound in her breast.

She could have fought everything else—but pity had beaten her. It was because, after that talk, she had found herself pitying Dick with all the strength of her being, that she had given her consent to a meeting away from the nursing-home.

She asked herself again the question which had been exercising her mind since that fateful morning in Brook Street: Would it not have been better for her to have remained in America? The Van Hoppers had been very good friends—too good,

in a way, for they had laughed to scorn the idea of her ever attempting to earn her own living again.

It was useless to debate the point now, and she decided to put the question away once and for all. One's destiny was decided by something entirely apart from oneself: fate had brought her back to London, fate had caused her path to cross again the man she had kissed in that sudden moment of ecstasy years before, and fate must now solve the problem of her future life.

At home that night—somewhat to Lady Sally's disappointment, she had said the Brook Street house was too magnificent for her and had taken a small service flat—Fay waited for the summons she expected.

Her imagination conjured up the scene in the Wingate home: and mingled with the pity she felt for Dick was a heartfelt sympathy for the woman who was his wife. There was not a hint of hypocrisy in this emotion: she had liked Isobel Wingate on sight; she felt that she could have been friends—very real friends—with her.

The bitter mockery of it all! Why should she have to wound that other woman, who was so true and steadfast a wife?

At this thought, a feeling of repentance for the little wrong she had already done—and yet, was it a wrong?—made her turn towards her bedroom.

Was not flight the better way after all? If she

went back to America, would not the whole wretched mix-up be smoothed out? Dick would miss her—miss her terribly—for a time, no doubt; but if she disappeared completely and finally, leaving no trace where she had gone, he would be bound to forget her. The strongest of men, and he was certainly that, behaved like children in certain circumstances, but Dick would still have his work, his wonderfully managed home—and that serene-eyed, beautiful wife, who would understand and comfort him when he returned to her.

For her to go away! That was the solution of everything. Why had she not thought of it before?

She walked towards her bedroom—and then, with her hand on the door, the telephone rang.

CHAPTER V

STOLEN HOURS

THE shattering of the silence by the telephone caused Fay to start. For a moment she hesitated, whilst her brain flashed forth the message: Fate has decided!

She walked to the instrument, took off the receiver, and listened.

"Dick speaking! To-morrow night, dear—will that suit you?"

At the sound of the man's voice all her resolution crumbled. A minute before, she had felt herself strong enough to make an heroic sacrifice. But now that the man she loved was in touch with her again, now that she could hear his voice, thrilling with emotion, that splendid mood of resistance changed: she was now just a woman—a woman who loved.

"Yes, dear"—the words came automatically—"I shall be leaving the Home at seven. I could see you at any time after eight."

Dick's voice sounded even more boyish. The joyous enthusiasm with which it was filled caused little waves of electricity to pass through her body.

"We will dine at Voisin's—it is quiet there, and we can talk. What a lot I shall have to tell you, Fay! My dear! What a brick you are to me! How can I thank you?"

The fluttering in her throat made her reply unsteady.

"Don't try now, Dick. And I'm not really good at all. I'm afraid I am very wicked—but we will have to-morrow night together, at all events."

"And many others, too!" Wingate's tone was now insistent, commanding, almost strident. He spoke like a man who was resolved to be the master of his destiny.

"I will be at Voisin's at a quarter-past eight, Dick."

He answered sharply: "I will call at your flat at eight; I want to have every minute possible with you."

"Good night, Dick." Without waiting for a reply, for she felt unable to listen to anything more, Fay rang off.

Isobel Wingate glanced at her husband as he entered the room.

The weight she had been carrying felt lighter. Something had changed Dick: that dreadful mood of morose brooding and inexplicable irritability had gone: he now looked happy and cheerful.

His eye caught hers. Immediately his expression

changed. It was as though he had resumed a mask again.

She had to play her part.

"I hope you have a good time, darling. When do you expect to be home?"

He half-turned away.

"I can't say, Isobel, but don't wait up." It might have been a stranger speaking, so unlike his natural voice was the tone.

With an awkward movement he turned towards her; but his lips, when he stooped, merely brushed her forehead.

"Don't wait up," he said again.

"Dick——!"

So great was her agony that the word came only faintly. Even then it seemed to stay in her throat, threatening to choke her. By the time she had uttered it, her husband was half-way across the wide hall.

He did not turn back, nor did he give any sign that he had heard. She watched him pass through the street door. Was it merely fancy, or had Dick really made a movement of relief, shaking his shoulders as though ridding himself of an unseen burden?

Her feet dragged as she walked back to the drawing-room. Although she hated herself for the thought, every moment brought a deeper conviction that, for the first time since their marriage, Dick had lied to her that night.

He had said that he had an unbreakable appointment. Instantly her intuition had sounded an alarm: "Where, dear?"

That terrible look of suspicious anger with which she had become so familiar during the last few days had leapt into his face instantly.

"At the Club." The reply was so curt as to be very hurtful.

"That's all right, Dick. I shall be glad of a quiet evening."

He looked at her questioningly.

"Feeling all right?"

Although her heart was so heavy, she had laughed.

"Of course! You know I'm always fit!"

Many, many times in the past her husband had complimented her upon her wonderful physical condition. Although he made his big income out of the ailments of mankind, he gloried almost fanatically in fitness. The memory made her flinch.

Ringing for the butler, she gave orders that she was not at home to anyone. Her thoughts, she knew, would be more than sufficient company for her that night.

She tried to read, but her attention was never on the printed page; she switched on the wireless, but the programme seemed insufferably dull, an alleged party of entertainers plumbing the uttermost depths of banality. There followed a reading

of an instalment of a serial story. This was not only banal but preposterous. Why were such things permitted ?

The temptation to go out, to do anything to divert her thoughts, was very great, but at the same time she felt she had neither the necessary energy nor the will-power to talk to anyone.

At five minutes to ten she threw aside the illustrated paper, whose pages were filled with the doings and posturing photographs of that ridiculous set of nonentities who are supposed to lead smart society, and decided to go to her room. Her mental unrest had caused a bodily weariness. She would be thankful for the cool ease and comfort of bed.

The telephone in the hall rang, and then came a tap on the door.

"Sir Lancelot Grey on the phone, Madam, asking for Mr. Wingate."

"I will speak to him, Jardine."

She went to the instrument.

"I am sorry my husband is out, Sir Lancelot," she told the distinguished physician. "Is it important ? Can I do anything ?"

The man's voice at the other end was very grave.

"I must get into touch with your husband at once, Mrs. Wingate. My patient, Lord Halliday, is very much worse to-night, and I want to call in your husband for a further consultation. Can you tell me where I can find Mr. Wingate ?"

"He is at his Club. I will phone him immediately and give him your message. Where are you speaking from?"

"165, Carlton House Terrace. Will you please tell your husband, Mrs. Wingate, that the matter is really most urgent? Otherwise I would not have troubled him."

"Certainly. I will ring him at once."

Two minutes later Isobel Wingate clutched the small table for support. She had rung up the Royal Sciences Club only to be told that her husband was not in the building, and that he had not been there at all that evening.

Dick had lied to her!

She had felt convinced of this at the time, but had put the evil suggestion behind her. Now chance had caused her to learn the truth.

And what was behind that lie? She felt she knew this, too. Dick had left her that evening to be in the company of another woman!

She rallied herself sufficiently to telephone Sir Lancelot Grey at Lord Halliday's house, and then went to her room. Even there she could not be at rest. Whilst she was preparing for bed, the telephone again rang.

"Is that you, Isobel darling? Sally Doone speaking. I say, has Fay Dennison been along to your place to-night? I want to see her urgently, and she isn't at her flat. I am phoning from there."

Isobel felt that her cup was brimming over.

"Miss Dennison hasn't been here to-night, Sally."

"What is the matter, Isobel? You sound depressed, dear. I must speak to that big husband of yours! By the way, where is he to-night?"

"He said he was going to his Club." She forced herself to make the reply; and then, with a faint "Good night, Sally," put up the receiver.

In the meantime Fay Dennison and Richard Wingate were dining at Voisin's.

This famous restaurant has a very definite part in the life of the Metropolis. Its *clientèle* is exclusive, its food and wines are above reproach—but there is yet another reason why it has outlived many rivals.

Voisin's is discreet.

It is to Voisin's that a Cabinet Minister may take a famous dancer, and be secure in the knowledge that the matter will not be talked about outside the swing doors of the restaurant. Voisin's patrons know each other, and maintain a mutual confidence: Voisin himself is the soul of urbanity, the essence of tact, and the very embodiment of discretion. Admirable man!

There has never been any scandal associated with Voisin's. But its walls would have some piquant tales to tell.

Richard Wingate had never been to the restaurant before, and his reason for selecting it that night

was due to some subconscious prompting of his mind. Somewhere or other he had heard of the place, had been informed that the ordinary people did not go there, and had thus made his choice.

The famous *restaurateur* himself received them. Voisin recognized Wingate at once from his photographs.

"M'sieur desires ?"

"A quiet table."

The tone was curt and businesslike, but to the knowledgeable *restaurateur* it was sufficiently expansive. He led them to a much-prized table in a corner.

Fay, whom a sense of excitement had made look radiant, softly clapped her hands as she glanced about.

"What a delightful place, Dick ! It was good of you to bring me here !"

As Wingate helped her off with her cloak, the fingers of his right hand gently squeezed her arm.

"You were meant for nice places, Fay." She greeted the compliment with a smile as they sat down.

Voisin himself took their order—a great honour —and Fay, watching Wingate discussing the dishes, fancied that the years had slipped away and that this was the night she had dined with Dick in that picturesque little café at Rouen. Now that his face had taken on that boyish look again, it seemed to her that Dick was not a day

older. His professional severity had vanished; the lines had gone from round his mouth, and his manner generally had quickened. He might have been back in his student days.

It was an exquisite meal. Voisin had been given a free hand, and he had risen to the occasion.

Fay was far too excited to appreciate the wonderful things set before her, yet she found herself gently upbraiding her companion for what she termed his extravagance.

Wingate's reply sent the blood mounting in her cheeks.

"If it were possible, Fay, I would give you the whole world, not merely a dinner at Voisin's!"

As she hung her head, not knowing what reply to make, he continued: "I am glad you like this place—I have never been here myself before, although I have heard a great deal about it—but now we will come here often."

She stopped crumbling her roll.

"Dick, I hate to spoil things, but——"

He was impatient.

"But—what?"

She looked at him pleadingly.

"Would that be fair to either of us? It is wonderful being with you—but there are so many things to remember."

The hand resting on the table was covered. Wingate's strong grip sent a fresh thrill through her.

"I was not going to argue, Fay. To-night is too short for that. But I want you to know that meeting you again here in London has been the biggest thing in my life. I lost you once," he went on in a fiercer tone, "and I do not intend to lose you again. Listen, my dear: you must not think me a cad——"

She interrupted him quickly.

"No! You could not be a cad, Dick!"

"You must not think me a cad," he repeated, "if I mention Isobel. Isobel is the most wonderful wife that any man could have. I have been very happy with her—happy in a solid, settled way.

"Everything, perhaps, has been too solid and settled. During the last five years the world has gone right with me. I have been successful, as you know——"

"I knew you would be, Dick, back—back in the old days," she told him.

"Successful beyond my merits, perhaps," he continued. "Anyway, I have had practically everything that a man could desire—a good home, a loving wife, success in my profession."

He leaned towards her, and she wondered what was coming.

"And yet, with it all, I have been unsettled, and—yes—discontented. All through those years of apparent happiness I have felt myself a prisoner. I have been restless. But circumstances chained me; it was because of this fretting I had that I

worked so hard. No one—not even my greatest friend, Selby Fowne, has ever guessed at this; but it's the truth."

"Dick—why have you been restless?"

There was no coquetry in the tone. It was the voice of one friend trying to help another.

The grip on her hand tightened.

"You ask me that, Fay? Are you honest in asking me that?"

"Dear, I want to help you if I can, really I want to help you!"

His voice had a ring of triumph.

"You have helped me! You are helping me! You have come back to me!

"Ever since that night at Rouen, Fay, I have missed you. During the past few years this desire, subconscious as it may have been, has taken a deeper hold on me. I realize now that the one essential thing in my life was missing. It was *you*!

"Even to you it is difficult to try to explain—but I know now that my love for you was vital and unchanging. I have loved my wife, it is true—but that is different: I feel I must protect and cherish Isobel—but you . . . Fay, I want to hold you in my arms always and for ever, kissing your lips till my senses reel and I am more than mad with the joy of you!"

"Oh, Dick!" Her voice was very faint.

"I'll tell you what you represent to me, Fay—

what you have always represented to me. You are something more than mere Love: you are Romance, that wonderful quickening thing which so many men of my age would give their souls to obtain. Think of me, and of my life: I do the same things day after day; I move in the same narrow world; I am always expected to be more of a machine than a man. With what result? I have to present an appearance to the world which is utterly false. I have grown into a sort of well-trained puppet! And, outside of my work, in spite of Isobel and all her marvellous goodness to me, I have little interest in life. Fay," he stopped short to ask her, "say that you understand!"

She looked at him frankly.

"Yes, Dick, I think I do understand. But, forgive me, dear, most men, particularly clever men like you, no doubt feel the same. The strange thing about happiness," she went on, as though speaking to herself, "is that directly we seem to have achieved it, it eludes us. A man will struggle all his life to make a fortune, and when he has secured it, he finds he has lost his capacity for enjoyment. As for marriage . . ."—there was a far-away expression on her face which at any other time might have caused Richard Wingate to question—"marriage must be the most difficult problem of all," she completed.

There was a pause and then she went on:

"Dick, what you have just told me would

cause many women to lose their heads. In one respect, I cannot deny that you have made me very happy. But, dear, I am not a thief—I will not be a thief!"

"A thief?" He did not seem to understand.

"I should be a thief if I took you from Isobel. Life is so difficult for us women that one must try to avoid bringing grief to another."

He caught her hand again. Her refusal made him remember how much she represented to him. He became vehement.

"Stop talking like that!" he commanded; "now that by a miracle you have come back to me—you, the one woman in all the world!—I cannot, will not, let you go! As for Isobel, of course I shall do the right thing. It will be difficult—but I shall have to tell her the truth. That is the only honest way—honest for me, as well as for her. Honest for you, too.

"There is this to be said: Isobel has never really known me—she has only known the man she thinks I am, the man I have pretended to be. That man suffices her; she is content with him. And she has her home—that home upon which she expends so much loving care, but in which I feel sometimes I must stifle. She will feel it——"

"It will break her heart!"

Wingate looked at the girl almost savagely.

"Don't say that!" he commanded again; "don't

make it more difficult than it already is. I know what you would tell me, Fay—you, white-souled as you are, would remind me of my duty, my conscience, my decency. Yes, I know all about that, but what I have to say to you in return is this: If I am to carry on with life at all, you are necessary to me. Having you, I find all the old vivid interests coming back; without you, I am utterly dull and inert. Before you came back to me, I felt I simply existed. My heart aching for you, subconscious as this ache may have been, I could not have carried on with the farce much longer; my mind called out for change, excitement, something pulsing, something which would grip me and take me entirely out of myself. Then you came, bringing me all this—and love as well! Fay, I will not let you go!"

Richard Wingate felt that it was a man outside himself who was speaking—a man who had been re-born within the past few days. This new man was strong, defiant; he challenged Fate, and cried upon it to rob him if it dared. This new Richard Wingate had set himself above ordinary laws; all he troubled or scrupled about was, this girl being necessary to him, he was going to claim her.

Wingate was not callous. Even in this moment of intensity, the image of his wife was a gentle memory. He thought of her kindly and gratefully. To save Isobel pain, he would have made any

sacrifice other than relinquishing his hold upon the girl opposite. He felt that a power outside of himself had brought this revolution into his life; and, because of this conviction, he was compelled to thrust Isobel on one side.

"You have understood everything so well, Fay. Now that I have told you, you must realize how badly I want you. Think what we can do, what times we can have together! With you, I shall be able to live again, to see things with new eyes, to get back the zest I have lost. Make me your promise!"

She smiled at the unconscious selfishness of the appeal. What children men were!

"Dick, you mustn't overwhelm me! Already, you have lifted me off my feet. It is impossible for me to make you that promise now. It is far too big, far too important a decision to give suddenly." While his face became rigid, she continued quickly: "Let us make the most of this night now we have it. Take me where we can enjoy ourselves. Do you still dance, Dick?"

To her immense relief, he fell in with the suggestion.

"I do very little dancing now, but to-night—we'll go to Wyndham's Club. I shall be proud to be seen with the most beautiful woman in London!"

Once again his mood had changed. Years had

slipped away from him once more and he had become almost boyish.

As he helped her on with her cloak, she whispered: "If we are seen, Dick—will people talk? It would be dreadful to do anything that looked underhanded."

He answered her fiercely.

"Let them talk! What does it matter? We shall have to be seen together sooner or later."

To that she had no reply. Her mind was in too great a turmoil to be able to think coherently.

Wyndham's Club is the most fashionable resort of Bohemian London. It is favoured with the patronage of some of the highest in the land, and even Royalty itself has danced there. Managed by the famous Carlo, it offers to its exclusive *clientèle* perfect food, exquisite wines, admirable service, and a perfectly wonderful, if somewhat congested, dancing floor.

As they stepped out of the taxi-cab, Fay slipped her arm through Wingate's.

"Fancy you going to Wyndham's, Dick!"

He laughed.

"I must admit it's rather out of my line of country, but Carlo has been a patient of mine. He badly wanted me to pay his Club a visit, but I never thought of doing so until to-night."

Admittance to Wyndham's Night Club, unless you are a member, or accompanied by a member,

is rigidly barred, but when Carlo saw the name on the card, he came forward himself to welcome his unexpected guests.

"And Mrs. Wingate, too," he smiled; "this is indeed a great pleasure."

Fay felt a touch on her arm. Wingate allowed the remark to pass and, piloted by Carlo, they threaded their way into the dance-room.

It was a scintillating scene. Distinguished men, bearing in their faces and figures the pride of race, were paying court to women whose beauty made the room radiant. This place was a carnival of pleasure, and Fay felt herself thrilling to the spell of it.

A dance orchestra, under the leadership of an emotional Italian, started up a fox-trot soon after their entrance. Instinctively the girl turned to her companion.

"Do let us dance, Dick!"

For answer, Wingate held out his arms. She glided towards him with a grace that caused the animated conversation about them to hush for the moment, and then they were out on the polished floor.

The pulsing music sent a message. It was an exhortation to them both to live and love.

Wingate had a sense of unreality, and yet it seemed that all the rest of his life had been merely a prelude to this moment.

The wonder of this girl! Now that she was

so near him, now that her intoxicating beauty caught at his throat, he was almost afraid to look at her. When he did, brown eyes smiled into his.

"For a man out of practice you dance wonderfully well, Dick."

Conventional words, but the soft huskiness of her tone charged them with meaning. Her body yielded insensibly to the pressure of his arm in the rhythm of the dance. The music swelled and throbbed. The wild notes of the violins clutched them. Passion and desire filled the soft scented air. Wingate continued to dance as though he were in a dream.

There could be no going back for him; he was more determined than ever now. He had left his prison-house, and was winging his way to freedom.

"Fay, darling!" he whispered.

"Dick, don't! Don't say anything more—don't tempt me too hard!"

His hold on her tightened.

"Do you want any tempting?"

Her lips moved but no answer came. Yet it seemed to Wingate that she had said "No".

At that moment the music stopped, and it occurred to both of them that they were standing alone in the centre of the floor, their secret plainly to be read.

This knowledge affected them in different ways.

Fay trembled, feeling somehow ashamed, but the man drew himself up proudly as he walked away with his dancing partner.

Time sped magically. No couple were quicker on the floor than these two, who were determined to make the most of their temporary paradise.

Towards midnight they supped, and Carlo, ordered to produce his finest champagne, murmured delightedly to himself: "These English! Who would think that a man so stern, so grave, so serious, could so change! And the lady, so pretty, she is not his wife after all! Well, well!"

They were half-way through when a man, whose manner was very agitated, crossed to their table.

"Good evening, Mr. Fowne." Fay Dennison was the first to recover her poise.

"Good evening, Miss Dennison." The salutation was abrupt, almost curt. "I have been looking for you everywhere for the past two hours, Dick," continued Selby Fowne.

"What's the matter?" Wingate's tone was as abrupt as his own.

His best friend measured him with a glance.

"Something serious. Otherwise, of course, I should not have bothered! If you don't mind, I would prefer to tell you privately—you will excuse us, Miss Dennison?"

The girl had paled, but she replied readily: "Of course! Please do not worry about me."

"I'll be back almost immediately," Wingate promised her as he rose.

His manner was almost hostile, as he accompanied his friend into a smaller and more secluded room.

"Now, what does all this cursed secrecy mean?" he demanded, flinging himself into a chair.

Selby Fowne remained unruffled. But his voice was grave, as he replied: "Dick, my only object in butting in is to save you from making an almighty ass of yourself."

"Damn you, what do you mean by that?" angrily retorted the other.

Selby Fowne made a gesture with his hand.

"Didn't you have an arrangement with Sir Lancelot Grey to-night?"

"Well?"

Fowne put a hand on his friend's arm.

"Grey rang up at your house shortly before ten. He wanted to have a further consultation with you about Lord Halliday. Isobel thought you were at the Club, and"—there was a brief hesitation—"I offered to find you."

"And so you did some spying?"

Into Selby Fowne's face there flashed a look of pain.

"You are not yourself, Dick, or you wouldn't say that. You're on edge. It was lucky that I did find you, I think." His manner changed. "Get a taxi, man, and go straight to Carlton

House Terrace—even now it may not be too late. You know what a talker Grey is."

Wingate winced in spite of himself. In the tumultuous excitement over planning to meet Fay, he had entirely forgotten the arrangement with Sir Lancelot Grey. The latter had told him in the afternoon that if a fresh crisis occurred he would call Wingate in again on a consultation, to see his distinguished patient.

The realization that he had been false to his trust sobered him.

"I'll go immediately," he said; "thank you, Selby." Then, suddenly recollecting, "I must explain to Miss Dennison——"

Selby Fowne seized his arm. "I'll explain to Miss Dennison, Dick, and see her home. Don't you realize, man, that there is not a moment to be lost?"

Wingate did not reply, but, going to the cloak-room, put on hat and coat.

On the steps of Lord Halliday's residence in Carlton House Terrace he met Sir Lancelot Grey. The latter was brusque to the point of rudeness.

"You're over two hours late, Wingate."

The physician again, Wingate came to the essentials.

"How is Lord Halliday?"

"Better, fortunately. I presume you were unavoidably detained somewhere?"

"Yes—but I am very sorry, Grey."

"Oh, that's all right. If it were the ordinary man—but I've never known you fail anyone before, Wingate. Going home?"

Wingate accepted the lift, but was silent throughout the short journey.

To his surprise, his wife was not in bed.

"I told you not to wait up, Isobel."

"I couldn't go to bed, Dick. At ten o'clock Sir Lancelot Grey rang up. He wanted to see you urgently——"

"I have seen him. There is nothing for you to worry about. Now get away to bed."

There was one all-important, burning question she wanted to ask him, but at the sternness of his face, and the cold finality of his voice, the words died in her throat.

She slowly left the room, bowed down with the consciousness of one overwhelming thought.

"I have lost him," were the words that beat relentlessly into her brain.

CHAPTER VI

SELBY FOWNE: STANDARD-BEARER

I

SO badly wounded that she could not even cry, Isobel heard the clock on the mantelpiece chime every hour throughout the night.

She felt she would never be able to rally from this devastation which had come into her life, shattering every dream, destroying every hope. It was as though her soul had been murdered, and that her body was the mere useless husk remaining of the woman she had once been.

Isobel Wingate, unlike so many possessors of sweet and unselfish natures, was not a fool. Her perfect faith in her own happiness may have blinded her before, but now her eyes were wide open. Her common sense forced her to face the truth—and the truth was that, through some unlooked-for tragedy, she had lost the love of the man she had hitherto regarded as a god.

Dick false to her! It seemed unbelievable, unthinkable even!—and yet her woman's instinct drove home to her the pitiless truth.

Even when her brain was so tortured that she

was unable to think any more, sleep would not come; and the maid, when she came with the morning tea, started in instant sympathy.

"Why, madam—are you ill?"

Isobel forced a smile.

"I couldn't sleep very well last night, Marjorie—that is all."

That was all! The tragic significance that underlay the three words!

At breakfast Isobel was merely a wraith of her usual self. She was first down, and she tried to still her twitching nerves by glancing at *The Times*, but the lines of type seemed to leap out of the paper and strike her between the eyes.

Then the step she knew so well.

"'Morning, Isobel!"

"Good morning, Dick!"

She really tried to be brave and steadfast, but her nerves went back on her.

Her husband, in the act of stooping to brush the white forehead with his lips, stopped.

"Under the weather, old girl?"

"I—I couldn't sleep very well last night." She tried to laugh the matter off, and almost succeeded. "Do I look too ghastly this morning?"

Wingate half-turned away.

"Oh, it's not so bad as that, old girl—only you seemed—well, a bit 'off'."

Although the effort almost made her swoon, she smiled again.

"Come and have some breakfast and don't be silly, dear," she said.

It was a silent meal. Both were self-conscious and confused—what else, in the circumstances, could either have hoped to be? Wingate had conscience-pangs; when a man's mind is uneasy, he has to be a good actor to avoid showing nervousness; while Isobel felt that the morning was worse than the night of anguish through which she had just passed.

In the act of taking from his wife's hand a cup of coffee, Wingate said somewhat confusedly: "Isobel, everyone is on to me to get away from this confounded heat. I'm far too busy to leave Town—but there's no earthly reason why you should stay on here. What do you say to going down to Frinton—it will be quiet this time of the year, but really I think it would do you good."

"You want me to go?" The words were the first that framed themselves to her mind.

"Well"—Dick's manner became more confused—"I don't know about *wanting* you to go, old girl, but you look a bit off colour—I could manage quite well for a month or so. You'd be all right with Marjorie at a hotel."

"Yes, I could manage all right with Marjorie." Now that she was face to face with stark tragedy, the thought of Marjorie's unswerving affection and loyalty was one gleam of light in the general

forbidding darkness. But the biting mockery of it—when her husband had failed her, to rely upon a maid!

"Shall we call it settled then?"

How eager he was to get rid of her! Then—the hateful thought almost choked her—he would no longer be under the painful necessity of lying. He would be able to meet Fay Dennison without subterfuge.

Although her spirit was crushed, she would not yield so readily as all that.

"I cannot promise, Dick; I must have time to think about it. Anyone would judge that you were anxious to get rid of me!"

The thrust—she had not intended it as a thrust; it was just the welling-up of an overwhelmed soul—went home. She saw Dick flush. He had to bite his lip before he could recover sufficiently to reply. It was impossible for her to avoid seeing this.

"You're talking nonsense, Isobel!" now came the reply; "I can't understand what has come over you the last few days; you seem to twist everything I say the wrong way round. Why is it? Why have you changed?"

This was too much: it was unendurable. She had to protest.

"Deception does not become you, Dick," she said, looking him straight in the face; "it's not I who has changed."

Before he could make any reply, she had risen from the table.

In a few fierce strides he was at the door, barring the way.

"What do you mean by that, Isobel?" She could see the muscles in his jaw working—a sure sign that he was nervy.

"Dick, I cannot discuss the matter with you now. If you care to give me your confidence—that confidence which you've never kept from me before—I shall be ready—oh, Dick!"—she broke down—"please let me go!"

He opened the door for her and she passed through.

Ten minutes later, as she sat in the small room which had always been kept for her private use, she heard the front door close. Dick had left her without a word!

II

Although she guessed much, Isobel did not know all that had happened on the previous evening. For instance, she would have been surprised had she seen Selby Fowne and Fay Dennison driving home in the same taxi from Wyndham's Club.

Selby Fowne had a disagreeable task, but in characteristic fashion, he determined to "get on with it."

He found Fay Dennison nervous and anxious.

"Mr. Fowne, what has happened? Is it anything very serious?"

He made no attempt to spare her Sirens, however attractive, had to be dealt with harshly—especially on such an occasion as this.

"I am afraid it is very serious, Miss Dennison." Then, without apparently noticing the look of alarm which had leapt instantly into the girl's eyes: "The fact of the matter is that Wingate was due for an exceptionally important consultation this evening—and he evidently forgot everything about it."

"Through me—it was my fault!"

Fowne did not contradict her. He remained silent.

"Is it any use my saying how sorry I am?" Fay was evidently on the verge of tears. Yet Fowne refused to offer her any consolation. When he thought of the distress her coming into his circle had caused, he experienced difficulty in keeping back a storm of angry words.

Fay looked up. Her eyes were like violets touched with dew.

"Where is Dick—Mr. Wingate—now?" she asked.

"He has gone to make his excuses for not keeping his appointment. I offered to see you home."

The speaker's manner was so abrupt that Fay stared. She had always imagined Selby Fowne

to be the most amiable of men. Yet now his voice was chilling.

She rose, angered by his tone.

"You needn't trouble—I can find my way back quite well by myself." Her manner challenged Fowne's.

But the man who was usually a past-master in good nature and conciliation merely frowned.

"When I promise a thing, I usually try to carry it out," he replied. "I promised Wingate that I would relieve him of the duty of seeing you home —and I am going to do it."

"Very well. If you insist, I suppose I cannot raise any objection."

Fowne signalled a passing waiter, and the latter fetched Fay's cloak.

Yes, Isobel Wingate would have been surprised could she have seen inside the taxi, into which Fay and Fowne stepped a few moments later.

Neither of them spoke during the short drive, and even when the time came for parting, the conversation was strictly limited.

"Thank you, Mr. Fowne."

"Good night, Miss Dennison." He waited until the door had closed behind her, then walked quickly away.

The natural, indeed, the almost inevitable result of attempting to thwart a woman is to encourage her to take the opposite course. Selby Fowne,

zealous in his friendship for the House of Wingate, had defeated his own ends in treating Fay Dennison in the way he had done that night.

"How dared he! How dared he!" Fay asked herself when she reached her room. The memory of Selby Fowne's attitude was almost unbearable. She would speak to Dick the next day about it.

And she would speak to Dick about his own conduct, too; he should learn that she would not tolerate such treatment. Granted that Dick had had to leave hurriedly, surely he could have spared time to have come back to wish her good-bye and to explain that his friend would see her home?

Altogether, Fay went to bed very much in the mood for rebellion—and when an exceedingly attractive woman is rebellious, something is generally due to happen.

As, like the other woman who loved Dick Wingate, she lay awake, Fay decided on her future course. She would snap her fingers at people like Selby Fowne, and answer the call which Destiny had sent her. If Fate had not meant this thing to happen, then it would not have caused her to return to England. What was meant to happen *would* happen.

With that, she fell asleep.

She was late at the nursing-home the next morning, and was gently reprimanded by Lady Sally in consequence.

"And by the way, young woman, where were you last night? I kept ringing you up at your flat—and you weren't at the Wingates'. I know, because Isobel said that she hadn't seen you."

"No, I was not at the Wingates'." How much did this keen-eyed questioner know—or guess?

"Perhaps you won't mind telling an inquisitive old woman exactly where you were, my dear?" Lady Sally looked like a bright-eyed bird.

"I don't mind telling you at all, darling—I was at Wyndham's Club."

"With whom?"

Fay felt an impish mood of mischief commence stirring within her.

"How very inquisitive you are, to be sure! Well, if you *must* know, I was with—Mr. Selby Fowne."

Lady Sally's face softened.

"Fay, Selby Fowne is one of the finest men I know. I should dearly love to hear that——"

But Fay had sharply interrupted.

"Don't be silly, darling—he merely saw me home."

Lady Sally turned away with a half-smile. Wise as she naturally was, she prided herself at that moment on more prescience than she actually possessed.

Later in the day she happened to meet Selby Fowne in Wimpole Street.

"What's this I hear about you leading the giddy

life with Fay?" she asked, and was gratified to see a flush creep into the face of the practitioner.

"Nothing very giddy, I am afraid, Lady Sally. Miss Dennison confessed to a wish to see the newest dance club, and I——"

"You, like the good soul you always are, offered to take her. You needn't tell me any more. But stoop down a little—I want to whisper something."

His confusion growing, Selby Fowne inclined his head.

"I have thought for some time that you ought to marry, Selby. Forgive an outspoken old woman, but it would give me great joy to see Fay settled. She is far too attractive to continue to be at large."

He found himself mumbling something in reply. What it was, Fowne never knew, but it seemed to please Lady Sally Doone, for she waved a hand gaily to him in parting.

Selby Fowne looked very grave as he walked away. The words of Lady Sally had caused him to think furiously. Could a solution be found that way? It was extremely unlikely, but he was willing to try it. In any case, it might serve to divert Fay Dennison's thoughts.

That afternoon, as chance would have it, he had a patient to visit quite close to Hamilton Circus. This duty done, he found himself at the Wingates' front door.

"Yes, Mrs. Wingate was in—and, of course, she would see him," was the butler's answer.

A minute later he was shaking hands with the woman whose deeply troubled face caused him such a pain at his heart. Yet, to Isobel Wingate, he was the same cheery friend she always knew.

"It's fortunate you called, Selby, because—" Isobel's voice trembled, and she was unable to complete the sentence.

"Because—because what?"

"Because I am going away," she told him.

For five seconds, Selby Fowne's heart threatened to stop beating; then the inexhaustible courage of the man enabled him to smile again.

"Oh, you mean you're taking a holiday, Isobel? Jolly good idea, too! I wish to goodness I could! Lucky little woman to be going away with her big fine husband!"

Isobel's hand caught his coat sleeve. The touch seemed to set him on fire.

"Dick isn't going with me, Selby."

"What?"

"No, he is too busy, he says. So he wants me to go down to Frinton with Marjorie, my maid. He says that I am looking under the weather—do you think I am, Selby?"

How to keep calm! How to control himself so that his voice remained steady! Using an almost superhuman effort, he looked into her face—that face which was so infinitely dear to him.

"I must say, Isobel, you're not looking quite your usual bonny self. A few weeks at Frinton ought to do you the world of good. Mind you have a good time, and"—the words were out before he could stop them—"and don't worry about that always busy husband of yours!"

"Selby, do you give me your word of honour that I have really no need to worry?"

He went cold—cold and rigid. It was impossible for him to answer this question without lying, for he was the one person in the best position to know how much terrible worry the truth—that ghastly, shattering truth—would give this woman.

"Look here, Isobel, getting morbid like this is the surest sign that you want a holiday. My advice to you is to pack this very afternoon, and get down to Frinton in time for dinner."

The hand on his coat sleeve tightened its grip.

"But—you haven't answered me, Selby!"

"Answered you!" In his breast his heart felt like a stone, but still his voice was gaily mocking. "Little woman, do you really think that I would allow any worry to come to you? Do you forget that I am the Standard-bearer for the House of Wingate?" He suited action to the words, marching in mock heroic fashion up and down the room, carrying the brass poker he had snatched up, as though it were the pole of a banner. Without looking at her face, he stooped and touched Isobel's hand lightly with his lips.

"My liege lady," he said, "leave whatever worry there is in the world to me."

At that moment, Fay Dennison was talking to Dick Wingate in her private room at the nursing-home.

"Even if he is your friend, Dick, please understand that I will not allow Mr. Fowne to treat me again as he did last night."

Wingate, whose nerves were especially frayed, seized on the words sharply.

"Why, darling—what did he do?"

Fay stamped an immaculately shod little foot. "He was very, very rude. He seemed to think that I was responsible for you missing that important appointment last night—by the way, was it really very serious? You not keeping it, I mean?"

Wingate laughed.

"Serious? Not at all! I can't always be at the beck and call of these confounded surgeons."

"But Mr. Fowne said it was most serious."

"Never mind what Fowne said." Colour flamed into his face, and his voice took on a sharper tone. "Selby Fowne has been doing too much meddling lately. I apologize, Fay, for allowing him to see you home last night. He volunteered——"

"And seized the opportunity to play the Heavy Father. When I said that it must have been through me that you missed the appointment, he didn't

reply. I was made to feel like a very naughty child."

"I'll see Fowne about that," stormed Wingate; "the fellow is far too fond of interfering with my affairs, and I'm going to put a stop to it straight away."

"Dick, dear, I know he is your best friend. I should hate anything to happen because of me."

Wingate, as he leaned towards her, made a reply which set her pulses throbbing.

"I'll allow no one to come between us, Fay—Selby Fowne, nor anyone else."

Recalled to his professional sense of duty by the clock on the mantelpiece, Wingate then left to commence his round of the different wards. More than one of the nurses mentally commented on how absent-minded he seemed; and he was still in a deep abstraction when he arrived home at seven o'clock that evening.

Isobel had not taken Selby Fowne's advice to pack at once. She was determined to spend one more evening with her husband, and to endeavour to gain the confidence which now seemed lost to her for ever, before leaving for Frinton. She knew Selby Fowne too well to allow his well-meant banter to calm her fears; but her love for Dick was a sufficient incentive to make her put forth a fresh fight.

She was already dressed—dressed with meti-

culous care in order to attract Dick's admiring eye —but her husband looked at her almost as though she were a stranger.

"I expected a telephone call to say that you had gone, Isobel."

Much of her new-found courage vanished at the words. What had changed Dick that he could be so cruel?

"If you insist upon my going, Dick, I will leave in the morning. But I wanted to have one more evening with you—one more dinner just by our two selves." Because he made no response to her invitation, she continued hurriedly: "Dick, I am positive you are worrying about something. Something has changed you. What is it? Won't you tell me? I asked Selby——"

He caught hold of her shoulder.

"You did what?" It was difficult to believe that this was Dick speaking.

"I asked Selby Fowne."

"What did you ask him?"

"I asked him if he knew what was worrying you!" In the presence of this new Dick, a Dick she could not recognize, she felt unable to tell the literal truth.

"When was Selby Fowne here?"

"This afternoon; why?"

Wingate half-turned away to make an impatient gesture.

"The fellow's here far too often!" Then like

the cruel lashing of a whip: "Anyone would think he was in love with you!"

For a moment Isobel actually felt that he had struck her. She had the same sense of physical nausea.

"Dick! How dare you say such a thing? How can you say such a thing? You must have taken leave of your senses for the moment!"

The handsome face was disfigured by a look from which she shrank.

"I know what I am saying very well, Isobel. The fact is, Fowne has made a habit of interfering in my affairs—and it's got to stop! Did he try to persuade you from going away to-day?"

"You cannot realize what you are saying, Dick. I do not know what is the matter with you, but I shall refuse to talk to you any longer unless you change your attitude. No, Selby did not try to stop me going to Frinton; he said he thought it would do me good."

"Most considerate of him, I'm sure," was the sarcastic rejoinder; and then, unable to stand any more, Isobel turned and left him.

At first, she thought of having dinner in her own room; but again her love beat her pride and at eight o'clock she went into the dining-room.

But all her efforts in the way of reconciliation were fruitless, and the end came when, in reply to her direct appeal: "Won't you give me your confidence, Dick?" her husband said: "My dear

Isobel, you are talking nonsense—I have nothing to confide."

It was then—but only then—that Isobel realized that she could no longer stay in the same house as her husband.

III

Selby Fowne, self-styled Standard-bearer to the House of Wingate, did not dine with his usual relish that night. Much of the savour had gone out of life for him, and he sent dish after dish away untasted.

Presently, he came to a decision. Going to the telephone he asked for a certain Mayfair number. The strain of waiting was reflected in his face. "Is that you, Miss Dennison?" The voice at the other end assured him it was.

"There is something I particularly want to ask you. Would it be possible for me to see you this evening?"

Fay Dennison did some rapid thinking. Her mood had altered from the previous evening; it had changed even from that afternoon. She was conscience-smitten about the man who had just made her this strange request; it was simply through his friendship for Dick that Selby Fowne had been so abrupt to her the night before. Perhaps now he wanted to apologize; she would be more than ready to meet him half-way.

"If you don't object to coming to a bachelor

girl's flat, Mr. Fowne, I shall be very pleased to see you," were the words she sent over the wire.

"Thanks awfully, Miss Dennison. I'll come round at once."

It was a very thoughtful Selby Fowne who made that short taxi-cab journey. He was still thoughtful when he found himself sitting opposite Fay Dennison in her small but artistically furnished drawing-room.

"You're just in time to have coffee, Mr. Fowne."

He accepted the small cup mechanically, wondering what this girl would say to him when he broached what was in his mind.

After she had accepted a light for her cigarette, Fay smiled across at her visitor. "I hope you haven't come to give me another curtain lecture, Mr. Fowne?"

"I am afraid I was very rude last night, Miss Dennison. Will you please accept my apology?"

"Of course! I know what made you angry—and I admire you for it."

"You do?"

"Yes. I heard Lady Sally Doone say the other night that the friendship existing between you and"—she stopped momentarily, for the eyes of the visitor seemed very keen—"Mr. Wingate, was one of the most beautiful things she had ever known."

Fowne nodded.

"Yes, Dick and I are very old pals."

"And it was because of your friendship for Dick—Mr. Wingate—that you ticked me off last night—forgive the idiom, won't you?"

"Dick is a married man." The tone was very serious.

She accepted the challenge.

"And, being a married man, you are afraid of his meeting me—is that it?"

Selby Fowne seemed to swallow something in his throat.

"If you want to know," he said slowly, "I am jealous of Dick."

Fay started. Bewilderment showed in her face.

"You—jealous of Dick? But—why?"

Selby Fowne made another swallowing movement.

"Because you prefer him to me," he answered unsteadily.

Before the girl could reply, he had continued, speaking now in a quicker tone: "Although Dick has always been my best friend, is that any reason why I should not be jealous of him? Even back in the old days in France, I was jealous of him, although I may never have shown it. Then you went away—and Dick," the speaker's voice became curiously hushed, "married someone else."

"Are you trying to tell me, Mr. Fowne, that——?"

"That I am in love with you?—yes."

"But this—this is absurd! So absurd that I

feel almost inclined to laugh. It is so foolish of you to be in love with me!"

And, then, Fay actually did laugh. It was not a laugh of pure, spontaneous mirth, however; rather it was a laugh of one who has just realized that the high gods are making a jest of her.

"Why is it so foolish?" The man who had made such a surprising declaration moved towards her.

"Why? Because—well, because I could not possibly return your affection, Mr. Fowne. It would not be fair for me even to listen to you!"

"Does that mean that you are in love with another man?"

She looked at him frankly.

"Yes, I am—I am sorry——"

Selby Fowne shook his head.

"These things happen sometimes out of one's control. I hope this man isn't Dick Wingate, however, Miss Dennison?"

The expression of sympathy, which had made her face so tenderly feminine, vanished.

"You have no right to ask me that," she replied.

Selby Fowne's own face changed.

"On the contrary, as a man who is about to ask you to become his wife—no, please let me continue—I consider I have every right to make that inquiry."

"I shall not answer you, Mr. Fowne. And—you mustn't think me rude—but won't you please

go? It is useless for you to try to persuade me. I appreciate the honour, of course; if things were different—but now it is absolutely useless."

The visitor remained motionless.

"Nevertheless, Miss Dennison, I want you, please, to give the matter your most earnest consideration. I am not a young man, I know, but my position is pretty well assured, and I hope and believe I could make you reasonably happy."

Fay Dennison shook her head.

"It is useless for you to go on talking—why will you do it? It can only give me pain and you disappointment."

"And what do you think your affair with Wingate can bring you? If it continues, you will ruin one of the most successful careers in London, you will break the heart of a noble woman—and you will reproach yourself till the day of your death!"

"And as an alternative to this, you offer me honourable marriage! Mr. Fowne, you are chivalry itself—but, all the same, I cannot accept. And now, please, I think this farcical comedy has gone on long enough." She walked to the door and opened it.

Selby Fowne kept his ground.

"Before I go, Miss Dennison, I want you, for the reason I have named, to promise to drop this affair with Wingate."

"Such a true, unselfish friend, aren't you?" The tone was very bitter.

He ignored the gibe.

"I want your future happiness secured as well as that of Dick Wingate and his wife."

Fay stamped her foot.

"You are becoming impossible—" she had started, when a ring at the flat door made her stop.

"Please wait a moment while I see who it is."

Selby Fowne heard a familiar voice, and then he turned to see—Dick Wingate.

This was not the Dick he knew, however: the man facing him had an evil expression in his face and his eyes were blazing.

"What the devil are you doing here, Fowne?" The speaker was plainly unbalanced by rage.

"Steady, old man!"

"Don't call me 'old man', you blasted hypocrite! Styling yourself my friend, and sneaking round here when my back's turned."

"You're talking rot, Dick; why shouldn't I call on Miss Dennison?"

"Because"—Wingate drew closer to the man who was his best friend—"I'll half-kill you if you do!" he completed.

Before Selby Fowne could reply to this outburst, Fay had thrust herself between the two men.

"Dick, you mustn't quarrel! I forbid you to quarrel. Mr. Fowne came here to-night at my invitation."

The face which Wingate turned on her was frightening.

The Standard-bearer for the House of Wingate touched the nerve specialist on the shoulder.

"I came here to-night to propose to Miss Dennison."

"You proposed to Fay? You damned swine——!"

"I refused him, Dick!"

Wingate burst into a fit of unpleasant laughter.

"Well, you've got your answer, Fowne! Now clear out—— "

Selby Fowne turned slowly. He seemed about to say something, but, after a moment's hesitation, he ignored Wingate and turned to the girl.

"Good night, Miss Dennison."

"Good night, Mr. Fowne."

She held out a hand which the man clasped for a second.

"One other thing, Fowne," said a harsh voice, as he reached the door, "don't pay any more attentions to my wife."

Selby Fowne sprang round as though the other had shot him.

"You abominable cad!" he said very distinctly.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN WHO SNEERED

I

SCARCELY had the door clanged before Fay turned impulsively.

"Dick! That man is your best friend! I feel it instinctively."

Wingate glowered.

"He might have been once—but I've finished with him. He's taken far too much on himself lately—and he had to be taught a lesson. Wherever I have turned recently, I've come up against the fellow. I'm tired of it."

The girl was not satisfied.

"Do you know what I think, Dick? He pretended to-night to be in love with me——"

"The hound!"

"Dick, please don't interrupt: what I am going to tell you is very serious."

Wingate mastered himself with an effort.

"Well, carry on."

"Mr. Fowne told me to-night that he was jealous of you—because of me," she added quickly. "He said he was jealous of you even back in the old days in France. Then he proposed to me."

"And you refused him—of course."

"Of course! But all the time, Dick, I felt that the man was—how shall I put it?—not exactly acting, but carrying out something which he conceived to be his duty."

Wingate scoffed.

"A peculiar sense of duty to propose to a woman with whom he is not in love!"

"I dare say it sounds like that, but all the same, Dick, I feel sure that I am right. Darling, the love I have for you makes me afraid."

"Afraid?" As he put his arm round her, his face brightened.

"Yes, Dick—afraid. I feel that through me you are heading for disaster. I cannot forget, dear, that one of the finest professional careers in London may be ruined——"

Wingate swung her round so fiercely that she had to cling to him for support.

"That's not you saying that!" he declared; "that's what the mealy-mouthed Fowne put into your head, isn't it?"

"But, Dick, I feel it to be true myself. And then," her voice taking on another tone, "there is Isobel."

"What about—Isobel?"

"It will break her heart!"

"Is that another of Fowne's pious phrases?" demanded Wingate. "I am not going to enter into another argument, Fay; we threshed that

out some time ago. As a matter of fact, Isobel is going away."

Fay bit her lip.

"Why did you warn Mr. Fowne about not paying any further attention to your wife, Dick?"

There was something in Fay's tone which caused Wingate to look at her sharply.

"You're not jealous? You know you come first."

"No, I'm not jealous, Dick. I only said that because I suddenly realized into what deep waters we were plunging."

"Hang your deep waters! Lift your face up—I want to kiss you."

Wingate, when he closed the front door behind him that night, bore the air of a man who has satisfactorily settled some difficult affairs. It was certainly true that the recent episode with Selby Fowne was not a pleasant one to recall, but he bolstered himself up with the reflection that the man had become a confounded nuisance, and had asked through his behaviour for a good telling off.

He had expected to find that Isobel had retired, but, seeing her on the stairs, he called her name.

She came down to him, her face expressionless.

What devil prompted him to wound her afresh he did not know, and the words were out before he could recall them.

"You won't be troubled with Fowne again,

Isobel; I told him to-night to keep away from here."

His wife turned so pale that he thought she was going to faint. He stepped forward to assist her, but she gestured him to keep away. One hand went out to grasp the hand-rail of the staircase.

Then Isobel Wingate spoke in a voice that was utterly strange to her husband.

"Either you are losing your reason, Dick, or, through some malicious and mysterious whim, which I cannot hope to understand, you are wantonly destroying the things which made up your former life. No, please," as she saw he was about to reply, "this is the last time I shall talk to you about the subject, and I am determined to say what is in my mind.

"Not many hours ago you made a vile—it is not too strong a word—aspersion upon the honour of the finest gentleman in London. A moment's calm thought should remind you how much you owe to the friendship of Selby Fowne. Perhaps you do not realize in its full measure how splendid a gift that friendship has been. Ever since I have known him, Selby Fowne has proved as loyal to you as any one man could be to another. The ordinary man would have been jealous of your wonderful success; Selby Fowne, I am absolutely assured, has never for a single moment been envious of your growing reputation.

"The friendship of such a man, Dick, is not to be lightly cast aside. I have often considered that his championing of you on any and every occasion was simply splendid. And this is the man you have grievously hurt—perhaps insulted, to-night! What has happened to you? Why are you such a fool?"

"A fool!"

Richard Wingate had never known his wife criticize him in that tone before, and he resented it.

"I said a fool—and I meant it, Dick. For what could be more foolish than for you to imagine, first of all, that such a man as Selby Fowne would betray his best friend's honour, or that even if he had, I should have stopped for one minute to listen to him? I tell you quite frankly that I have valued Selby's friendship almost as much as I have valued your love, but for you to think—for you to dare to think that there has ever been anything more than friendship between us is so contemptible that I feel I hate you!"

Even though he was obsessed by other things, Wingate could not help being impressed by his wife's unexpected display of spirit. It was because of this that he endeavoured to put up some kind of defence.

"I never accused you, Isobel. What I said was that the man was far too much in this house. And, apart from all that, he has been interfering to an unpardonable extent in my private affairs."

"What private affairs? I always thought that the lives of you two were open books to each other."

"Nonsense! Every man has private affairs. I shouldn't think of butting in on Fowne with things that didn't concern me. I expect him to do the same with me—but he hasn't, and there's an end of it."

"You might have known, Dick, that Selby acted with the best motives!"

"Oh, damn—I beg your pardon—his best motives!"

As the oath escaped his lips, Isobel turned to walk up the staircase.

Then, swiftly, she turned to him again.

"I leave here to-morrow morning, Dick—and I intend to stay away until your present manner completely changes."

"You do?"

"Yes, I don't understand you a bit. Something has changed you. I have been most hurt—and—and I cannot stand any more."

His reply cut her like a sword.

"You must please yourself, Isobel."

II

Isobel breakfasted in her own room next morning. While she was making a pretence to eat some toast, there was a tap on the door. Marjorie,

after a commiserative glance at her mistress, answered it.

"It's Mr. Wingate, madam."

"Come in, Dick," she said; and then, to Marjorie: "Return in a few minutes."

It tore at her heart to see the man she loved standing like an awkward schoolboy before her. Was Fay Dennison pleased at the havoc she had wrought?

"I have come to wish you good-bye, Isobel."

She rose, and held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Dick."

It was an act of friendship, but, judging from the way he regarded her, she might have been an enemy.

"You won't let me kiss you?"

She fought down her weakness.

"No, Dick—not until you return to me the same man as you were before."

"Return to you?" He appeared puzzled.

"Can you deny that you have left me? Left me in spirit, if not in body?"

He scowled.

"I don't understand you—you're talking rubbish."

She held out her hand again.

"Good-bye, Dick."

This time he accepted the hand-clasp before turning quickly and walking away.

"There is just one thing I want to tell you,

Dick," he heard her say; and with that he had to face his wife.

"Yes?"

"Before I leave London, I intend to see Selby. I value his friendship far too highly to allow him to feel that he has been slighted by me as well as you. I intend to apologize to him."

"On my account?"

"No. On my own. That is all, Dick."

"You must do as you think fit, Isobel." Then he was really gone.

The first person Isobel saw upon being shown into Doctor Selby Fowne's waiting-room that morning was Lady Sally Doone. The latter greeted her with that rare fascinating smile she reserved for her special favourites.

"Are you on the sick-list, too, my dear?"

Isobel had imagined that she would never smile again, but she contrived to answer the question in a tone that almost matched the other's.

"Not exactly, Sally darling. I'm going away—to Frinton. I've just dropped in to wish Selby good-bye—if he is not too busy. But I thought you scorned all doctors?"

"That's only my pose, you dear thing! To tell you the truth, I've got a nasty little pain in my—well, tummy, if you must know—indigestion, I dare say—and I want Selby to give me something for it. I expect he will laugh at me, and say I've

been over-eating, as usual—but I must put up with that!"

At that moment the door of the consulting-room opened and Selby Fowne appeared. He looked pale and very worried, but at the sight of his two callers he smiled.

"Who's first?"

"I'm first." Lady Sally, with a smile at Isobel, walked through the door.

The manner of Lady Sally Doone, as she sat down, was very unlike that of the ordinary patient.

"I know I ought to be ashamed of myself for calling during your receiving hours, Selby, but I simply had to ask you something. I was forced to tell that dear child," pointing to the waiting-room at the back of her, "a lie just now. She believed that I was suffering from a merely vulgar stomach-ache, but the truth is, Selby"—she stopped to look at the practitioner—"what is really the matter with me is a very wretched heart-ache."

"A common enough complaint nowadays, Lady Sally."

She sat up, alert.

"What has happened with the Wingates? You needn't try to put me off; it will be useless for you to attempt any foolishness of that sort. *I want to know!*"

Selby Fowne picked up a paper-knife, which he twirled idly between his fingers.

"Dick Wingate himself is the best one to answer that question, surely ?" he replied.

"I *have* asked him—and got severely snubbed for my pains ! I have had a pretty shrewd idea that—it sounds monstrous, but I believe it to be true—he is starting an affair with Fay Dennison. Is that so ?"

Fowne dropped the paper-knife.

"How on earth should I know ?" His manner was abrupt.

Lady Sally pretended not to notice.

"That was why, when Fay told me that you had taken her to Wyndham's Club——"

"I proposed to Miss Dennison last night and was refused," he put in.

"She refused you ! Little fool !"

This time it was Selby Fowne who appeared indifferent.

"It seems to me, Lady Sally, that no one at the present time can give Wingate a helping hand. I tried—and got snubbed ; you tried——"

"I would never have believed that it was Dick Wingate who replied to me over the telephone this morning," said Lady Sally sharply ; "but that poor child, Isobel—how are we to help her ?"

Fowne gloomily shook his head.

"Frankly, I don't know."

Lady Sally rose.

"But if Dick Wingate thinks he is going to

play fast and loose with the nicest wife in London, he will find that he has me to deal with!"

With this spirited declaration, she shook hands and went back into the waiting-room.

"Good-bye, Isobel—I hope you have a splendid time at Frinton!" Drawing the girl to her, she kissed the cold lips. "You will write to me, won't you?"

"If I have anything to say, Sally."

"And I'll take the very first opportunity of running down to see you. I mustn't stay longer now, I know you want to have a word with Selby."

In his consulting-room Fowne waited with thudding heart for her coming. It was because he loved Isobel Wingate with all the force of his being that he had made the sacrifice the night before. Fay Dennison was a woman to lure any man—but he had proposed to her, not because he wished happiness for himself, but because he wished to save the wife of his friend from unhappiness.

When he looked up, Isobel was by his side.

"I'm going away, Selby—this morning—now." The words were difficult to utter.

Like the gallant gentleman God had made him, Fowne pretended not to notice her agitation.

"Splendid! And Frinton, eh? My word, Isobel, you'll get so jolly brown and plump and what-not that we shall hardly know you when you come back!"

"I may not be coming back, Selby!"

"What?" He had been startled out of his carefully schooled caution.

"No—I cannot tell you more now. And that is not why I came in this morning. Selby—I want to say how truly sorry I am at Dick being so beastly to you! Will you accept my apology?—my own private, personal apology?—my—my——"

"Isobel! You mustn't—!" A tear had dropped on the hand which he had stretched out to her.

"I could not go away without telling you this, Selby."

"It was dear of you—but you mustn't worry, you know! It will all come right. Dick is too keen on his job. He has been overworking badly for months. Leave him to me!"

"But he must have been beastly to you!"

"Oh, no! Not a bit of it! Just a little edge-y, that's all. You leave him to me, Isobel."

With eyes bright through fresh tears, she looked straight at him.

"Selby—I—I want to kiss you!"

He stood still, stricken with wonder, whilst a glorious ecstasy wrapped him about.

Her lips brushed his cheek.

"I feel you're all I've got now, Selby," he heard her say. The words were so faint that he pretended not to hear.

III

Fay picked up the telephone.

"This is the Dunheved Nursing-home," she said.

"Yes," came back a quick, authoritative voice. "This is Sir Lancelot Grey speaking. I want to know if you have room for a bad nerve case—a private room would be best, perhaps."

Fay rapidly considered.

"I think we can manage it, Sir Lancelot."

"Good! The patient will be coming along very shortly. I am sending him to you because I wish him to be under Mr. Wingate. I am communicating with Wingate myself."

"Very well, Sir Lancelot."

Fay replaced the receiver with a sense of satisfaction. It was very gratifying to her, as assistant director of the nursing-home, to know that within such a short space of time it had attracted the attention and sympathetic goodwill of such a distinguished physician as the man who had just been speaking.

It was also very pleasurable to know that the medical world thought so highly of the man she loved. Dear old Dick! It was wonderful to her to hear his praises sung, even through such a prosaic medium as the telephone.

She felt particularly well that day. Not that she was ever very much below the line that marked

good health, but to-day—well, she was just radiant, glad to be alive, glad to be doing work for which she felt she had a call, glad above everything else to know that someone else's happiness depended on her.

It was the love that Dick Wingate had for her that made her feel so pleased with the world. She realized this, and yet, at this particular moment at least, she told herself that, if she had not met Dick again, her work at the nursing-home, so varied and interesting was it, would have kept her happy. Of course, now that Dick had come back into her life, his love was the sun round which she revolved, but——

She did not waste any further time in speculation, but proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for the new patient's reception. Her professional experience had caused her to witness so much human suffering that she had been forced to school herself to a certain callousness. Yet, now she found her thoughts wandering to this "bad nerve case" which was due very shortly. Perhaps it was because she felt so particularly fit that day that a cord of sympathy for this unfortunate man, whom Sir Lancelot Grey had said was a hopeless cripple, vibrated within her.

It was her duty to supervise the reception of all patients at the nursing-home ; and it was under her care that the stricken man was removed from the ambulance wagon and taken into the small

room which constituted one of the nursing-home's private wards, and was set aside for special cases.

She had not seen the man's face, which was partially covered, but when the nurses had gone, she approached the paralytic.

"Are you quite comfortable?"

No sooner had she said the words than she sprang back, a cry of alarm—almost of horror—on her lips!

From out a haggard, wasted face, a pair of eyes regarded her mockingly.

"You scarcely expected to see me, did you?" inquired a voice which Fay Dennison had never thought she would hear again.

She glanced quickly round, as though invisible eyes were prying. The action was not lost on the man, who burst into a fit of silent, mirthless laughter.

"No—I did not expect to see you again." She was so dazed, so stupefied, that she could only make this mechanical reply.

Again the man laughed. There was something horrible in this mirth.

"You thought I was dead, no doubt. That was what a good many others thought. But I'm not, you see—although that train smash might just as well have killed me. Up till now, I've been wishing it had—" He broke off, to ask in a yet more mocking tone: "Aren't you going to say you're glad to see me, Fay?"

She could not speak. It was as though she had been turned into stone. This thing could not be true—it was too ghastly, too horrible to be true! That this man should be alive, after all—and that he should have been brought to her—in this place—at this time!

"I suppose you are wondering how miraculous it all is," said the voice she hated.

It was then she replied:

"I am wondering what I have done to deserve seeing you again?"

"I beg your pardon, Matron——"

Fay swung round to see a nurse standing near the screen. Her agitation made her flush.

"Yes, Nurse—what is it?"

"Mr. Wingate has come, Matron."

She clutched the rail at the bottom of the bed.

"Thank you, Nurse. I will come."

A sense of helplessness overtook her. Only a bare half an hour before she had been glad to be alive. Now, she felt herself wishing to be dead. If Dick found out——

"Mr. Wingate is the distinguished specialist in whose care I am to be placed—isn't that so?"

"Yes, Mr. Wingate is the best nerve specialist in London. You will be in safe hands."

"And do you want me in safe hands, my little Fay? Perhaps you have fallen in love with someone since the last time we met? Have you, Fay?"

She leaned towards him, and in a tone of

concentrated anguish, said: "Why did you come here?"

The paralytic's lips slipped into that dreadful, mirthless, mocking smile once again.

"Why, when Sir Lancelot Grey commenced expatiating about the wonders of this new nursing-home, and about the accomplishments of its assistant director—you, my dear!—what more natural than that I should decide to come here? I made the journey to London to get the best possible advice—and now I've found love, as well."

"Love! Do you think you deserve any love from me?"

She felt unable to stay any longer—and yet a still greater ordeal awaited her outside.

Wingate looked at her keenly as she approached him.

"Why, darling, what's the matter?" he asked. "Anything happened?"

"No—nothing. What could have happened? Only, Dick—I am beginning to feel that—" She could not complete the sentence. She hated lies—and would not tell any more of them unless forced to do so. But suppose Dick knew; suppose he learned the truth—would his love turn to hate, his admiration to loathing?

"Beginning to feel that this place is getting too much for you? Is that it?"

She was grateful for the chance of escape.

"Yes—I am," she replied. "I feel I want to get away from it all."

"You have only to say the word, you know. We will go to-night, if you like."

It was a tremendous temptation, and if she had thought only of herself, she would have yielded to it. But, even in the presence of this unexpected horror which had come to blot out all thought of happiness, she remembered the words of Selby Fowne. If Dick left his work at a minute's notice like this, he would be irretrievably ruined. So she thrust the thought aside.

"Not yet, dear; you must have time to make your arrangements. And," getting a grip of herself, "there is a new patient for you to see—a special case sent here by Sir Lancelot Grey."

At the mention of the great physician's name, Wingate became interested.

"Oh—yes; I remember now: Grey rang me up. A bad case of paralysis—Grey doesn't expect him to live very long——"

"Oh—h!"

Wingate stopped to look at her.

"Why, Fay, you mustn't let a thing like that affect you. Surely you've seen enough cases——?"

"Yes. It was foolish of me. . . ."

"It was. None of us can afford to be too sympathetic. Take me to this man, will you?"

There was no chance to refuse, and three

minutes later she stood by the nerve specialist's side looking down at the man who had come back from the grave to haunt her.

She heard him speaking—and every word was an arrow in her heart.

"They tell me you're a magician, Mr. Wingate. Make me walk again and you can have what sized cheque you want. You see, I've got something to live for—a darling little wife—" Fay thought she would stifle, as the speaker turned his eyes from Wingate to her.

Then she heard Wingate answer in his usual professional style—and again each word dealt her a separate blow.

"We will do all we can, of course—and, in the meantime, you must not worry. Miss Dennison, who is our Matron, will ensure that you are made comfortable." The specialist broke off, to add in another tone: "And now we'll see what is actually wrong. . . ."

Half an hour later, the nerve specialist concluded his examination with the brief comment, "H'm!"

"Does that mean that like all the rest, you say there is no hope?" asked the man.

"It means that you must be patient," was the non-committal answer.

The speaker beckoned to Fay who, through the long and searching examination, had been

undergoing a mental torture which had left her weak and trembling.

When they were back in her private room, Wingate became explicit.

"He may live a month—or, on the other hand, he may live a good many years; it all depends on his will-power. There are cases—and this is one of them—in which the best of medical science is completely thwarted or substantially aided by the will of the patient."

"Oh!"

The word escaped her lips involuntarily.

"You're not yourself to-day, darling!"

Wingate's keen eyes were searching her face with such intensity that she felt certain he must already have read her secret—her terrible secret.

"I feel—a bit fagged—I think I will rest."

"An aspirin—only one, mind—and a cup of tea," prescribed the specialist. "Shall I call round to-night, Fay?"

How could she see him?

"No, I'll take things quietly to-night and go early to bed," she replied.

The relief when he was gone! She could not have continued talking to him.

Following out the promise she had made to herself, she rested on the couch in her room. She would have gone home if she dared.

And even now she was not allowed to remain in peace.

There was a knock, and the nurse who had been appointed to take charge of the new case entered.

"Sorry to disturb you, Matron, but the new patient, Mr. Redding, wants to see you. He was most insistent; I am afraid he may prove difficult. I should not have bothered you, only Mr. Wingate's last words to me on leaving were that Mr. Redding must on no account be allowed to become excited."

"Very well, Nurse, I'll see him."

Somehow she managed to find the strength necessary to take her to that small room which had now become peopled with evil phantoms.

"You wished to see me?"

The stricken man sneered.

"What did that specialist fellow say? He wouldn't tell me, of course—these damned Mandarins of Medicine never will—but he must have told you. What did he say?"

The man's voice had risen, and his eyes were unnaturally bright.

"He said that if you kept calm and behaved yourself, you might live a number of years."

"He said that? You're not lying to me, are you? You wouldn't dare to lie to me?"

"No, of course I'm not lying. Why should I lie?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . . But that couldn't

have been very good news to you, eh? You don't want me lingering on 'a good many years'! It looked to me that that Wingate fellow was likely to fall in love with you. . . ."

"I can't stand any more! Have pity on me! I thought you were dead—all the newspapers said so."

"Well, I'm not!" came the reply; "and I intend to go on living for as long as I can. That is what I called you in here to tell you!"

She faltered her way from the room. The sneer on the man's lips made her feel faint.

He might live for a good many years, Dick had said.

This man——

Her husband!

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHEQUER-BOARD

I

LONG after the stream of patients had gone, Selby Fowne remained at his table. He was thinking more deeply than he had ever thought in his life before: for now, at forty-five, he was facing the greatest crisis that fate had sent him.

A week had passed since his greatest friend—the man he had always loved like a brother—had looked at him with those hate-inflamed eyes in Fay Dennison's flat. A week ago—and every minute since, the Devil had been tempting him insidiously, relentlessly.

That morning Fowne had been particularly busy. A steady stream of patients had brought their complaints, their doubts, their fears to him, and he had listened with the courteous attention which accounted in a measure for his popularity as a doctor. In his present nervy state, the strain had been considerable; and now that it was over, now that he was alone, the reaction had come.

With this reaction came the voice of the tempter again.

"You love this woman—she is unhappy. Her husband has basely deceived her—she has been forced to leave him—why not go to her?" These were the words the tempter now used once again, to lure him from that steadfast path which, ever since Dick Wingate's lapse, he had endeavoured so loyally to tread.

The foundation of this loyalty he had always believed to be strong. It was Selby Fowne's experience that life brought a trial and a cross to almost everyone. Being in love with the wife of his greatest friend was the fate meted out to him. It was hard, devilishly hard—but, from the beginning, he had made the resolve to be clean and decent about it. What would have defiled some men had purified him. After all, it might be that Isobel, in spite of being married to the finest fellow he knew, might one day want a friend. Then, he had always told himself, would be his chance—but he swore to God, that friendship would be the only thing he would ever offer her. Sweet, wonderful soul that she was, she would never learn his secret. She would only know that he was her friend.

Her friend! The words had now a mocking quality; they taunted and gibed at him. He asked himself what he had gained by such stern self-discipline? He had played the game—and now he saw nothing but chaos! Even the sacrifice he had made in attempting to take Fay

Dennison away from Wingate had recoiled upon himself in bitter futility.

He pressed his clenched hands hard against his forehead, as the struggle between his two selves now intensified. The Devil had bided his time, and seized his chance. Fowne had only slept in snatches during the past week, and he had eaten very little. He was but a shadow of his usual physical self in consequence. Listening to the procession of neurotic women that morning had undermined what remained of his mental and physical stability.

"Go to her! She will be glad to see you—in her deep trouble she will listen attentively to what you have to say. Although she may never give you the love she gave her husband, yet you may achieve your life's desire. She may even consent to go away with you! You have sufficient money saved to keep you both in some sunny villa on the French Riviera—don't be weak, man! Seize your chance!"

That was the Devil, renewing his attack.

In reply, Selby Fowne mentally replied: "But I should be a treacherous hound! I should be playing false to every decent principle!"

The Devil replied: "Pshaw! You're talking hysterical nonsense, man! Hasn't Wingate, that wonderful friend of yours, proved himself false to every decent principle? And you

always said that when Isobel Wingate wanted help, you would give it her? Could any woman want help more badly than she does now? Don't persist in being a fool!"

The vision Fowne now had was maddening: he saw the eyes of the woman he loved brimming with tears. . . . Her hands were outstretched to him. . . .

He rose suddenly. He would have to get out; he could not stay in that room, stifled by his thoughts, any longer.

As he stepped into the street, he nearly collided with a man who stared at him without any sign of recognition.

It was Richard Wingate.

The weather continued glorious. Frinton was an earthly Paradise, but Isobel felt herself to be the unhappiest woman in England.

There were so many things she could have done. She could have played tennis or golf; she could have danced, flirted, exacted the admiration of every man in the hotel—but all these things were abhorrent to her: she scarcely had energy enough to bathe every morning in the cool, green sea.

Only her body was at Frinton—and her body no longer interested her since she had lost Dick's love. Her mind, her soul was in London: it hovered in three places—the house which

had been her home in Hamilton Circus, her husband's consulting rooms in Harley Street, and the Dunheved Nursing-home.

What was happening at any or all of these places?

On this particular morning she was sitting on the beach, indifferent to the gay and laughing scene. The thought came to her, how long would she be able to stand the monotony of being alone—with these thoughts grinding away inside her brain?

"Why—hello!"

A voice—feminine, somewhat shrill—had broken upon her reverie. Looking up, Isobel noticed Flossie Hartgill.

Flossie had never really belonged to her set. She had married into it—which was a very different thing. Bob Hartgill's swoop upon the Daly chorus for the purpose of holy matrimony had always been a puzzle to his friends, but when Flossie was his wife, she had to be received—at least once—and there was an end of it.

Isobel had never really liked the girl, but her wonderfully sympathetic nature had made her feel sorry for the ex-small-part-actress. This had induced her more than once to go out of her way to do Flossie a kindness. In return, the girl had seemed grateful.

"May I sit down? Fancy seeing you here! And all on your lonesome too!" Isobel was

not watching the speaker's face very intently or she would have noticed that as Flossie Hartgill said the last few words, she bit her lower lip—the action of an impetuous speaker who suddenly regrets an impulsive statement.

"Yes, do—I was feeling very bored!"

An observant attendant answered Isobel's signal by producing a deck-chair, into which Flossie sank with a sigh of relief.

"Bored! My dear, bored isn't the word for what I'm feeling. This place is too stiff for my liking—give me Brighton! I feel I can't breathe here!"

"Are you by yourself?"

Isobel asked the question for lack of something better to say.

"Yes—Bob has gone for a yachting cruise. I'm a rotten sailor, so I told him to pop off by himself. After wishing him good-bye at Southampton, I came on down here. My dear—" breaking off quickly. "I am so glad to see you!" She reached out and caught Isobel's hand. "Do you mind me saying that?" she continued impulsively.

Isobel smiled.

"Of course not! It's really very kind of you to say it."

"You're just telling me that. I'm not your sort, Isobel, but in spite of that, you've always been jolly decent to me. A jolly sight nicer,

incidentally, than most of my in-laws. I dare-say it's pretty common knowledge by now, but Bob's people always thought he was practically insane for marrying me—a chorus girl. However, Bob and I are happy—so what does anything else matter?"

"Nothing! Nothing matters if you are happy!"

Isobel had spoken on the spur of the moment. And she put such emphasis into the words that Flossie Hartgill turned to look at her.

"I like you for saying that. But, of course, you have been the greatest living authority on married bliss. To tell you the truth, when I first married Bob, I got rather fed-up at hearing you quoted so much." The speaker gave the hand she was still holding a squeeze before adding: "But directly I met you I realized that everything I had heard was true."

There was silence for some moments, during which time Isobel's eyes had a far-away expression.

"I have never compared notes with another married woman, Flossie," she said at length; "but what, in your opinion, is the surest guide to happiness in marriage?"

The girl by her side gave a hard little laugh.

"I'll put it this way," she replied. "My experience is that the surest way to make a man fed-up with you is to keep him tied to your apron-strings!"

Isobel turned sideways.

"I am afraid I don't quite understand what you mean by that, Flossie."

There was another hard little laugh.

"I suppose you'll think me crude and common, but if you don't know what I mean, then all I can say is that your husband must have been one in a million."

The speaker turned to meet the startled look of the woman she liked to call her friend.

"Let's have a good talk about that dreadful creature, Man," she continued. "As I've said before, *his* happiness—and that, it seems to me, is the principal thing to be considered in any marriage—depends on how much freedom you give him."

"Freedom ?"

"Yes—freedom. I had this out with Bob one night in the first month we were married. He was frank enough to tell me the truth. And the truth, according to Bob—and all things considered, Bob is as decent a man as you are likely to meet in London Society—was that every man now and then must be allowed to take an interest in another woman. He need not necessarily mean any harm, but it flatters his vanity to know that someone else besides his wife thinks him attractive. It also gives him a change from saying the same things to the same woman—the same woman being his wife."

"But I think it's horrible!" The truth had been revealed to Isobel through the lips of this ex-chorus girl, and she found it unpalatable.

"Horrible or not—it's the truth—at least, so far as my Bob is concerned, and he's just the normal average man, I take it."

"But what do you do? Do you simply sit still and suffer this? That sort of treatment would kill me." Isobel could have added that she already felt half-dead.

"Do? As a general rule, a woman can't do anything. She must pretend not to know. The consolation I have is that none of the affairs which relieve the tedium of Bob's existence last very long. That proves that he must be fonder of me than of any of these other charmers. Naturally, I'm fighting all the time, making myself as devastating and attractive as possible in my lord's eyes. And when he goes, what I consider a trifle too far—as he does sometimes——"

"What do you do then?" The speaker's voice was vibrant with eagerness.

Flossie Hartgill tossed her small head.

"Why, then, I sally forth on my own account. Pretending that I did not know Bob was dancing at this or that certain place, I put on my best rags, and hie myself there. There is sure to be an attractive, unattached man present—and when Mr. Bob sees us dancing together, the

fact is driven home to him that he has rather a nice wife. For at least a week after that he is my devoted slave. And that," concluded Flossie, "is my recipe for a happy married life, as lived in 1927."

There was silence.

"I haven't shocked you, Isobel?" Flossie's manner was anxious.

Isobel conjured up a pale ghost of a smile.

"Shocked me!—you've taught me a lesson," she replied.

That night, before dressing for dinner, Isobel sat, pen in hand, at the small writing-table in her room.

Strange how knowledge should have come to her through a girl she had never before thought of as a friend; stranger still, perhaps, that the most searching insight into the mind of the man, whose character she had thought she was able to read like an open book, should have been given her by a girl who could scarcely have exchanged a dozen words with Richard Wingate all her life.

The strangest thing of all, however, was that crude as were the words which Flossie Hartgill had used, she knew her statement to be true. Dick—she had to face the fact—was just like other men. He had wanted a change—and so he had gone to Fay Dennison.

Isobel, her chin cupped in the palm of her hand, looked earnestly into her mirror. Then she came to a decision.

She must be like other women: she must fight as Flossie Hartgill had had to fight.

Dipping her pen into the ink, she wrote rapidly a few lines. The letter finished, she slipped it into an envelope, and went downstairs to post it herself.

The envelope was addressed to "Selby Fowne, Esq."

II

"Why are you here, Nurse?"

Fay flashed the question at the girl in whose eyes smouldered not only rebellion but hate.

"I thought you rang, Matron." The untruth was palpable, and Fay's temper flared again.

"I did not ring—and if I find you out in another lie, you will be dismissed!"

The face of the nurse became distorted for a moment. Then the girl dropped her eyes, turned, and walked out of the room.

When she returned to the bedside, Fay noticed that the man whose presence mocked her every waking moment was smiling.

"Why did you speak to her in that tone? She is very kind to me." Michael Redding's thin lips twisted themselves into a fresh sneering grin.

"She is insolent—and a liar."

"Are you afraid of her because she has sharp eyes?"

Fay turned away. Her life had become a living purgatory. Wherever she was, the sneering face of this man, who was bound to her by the strongest legal tie, caused nightmarish fears. Michael Redding delighted in giving her torture; he had been a cad in health; with the shadow of death hanging over him, he was something worse.

"Perhaps she suspects that you are in love with the wonderful Wingate! Shall I tell her, when she comes in, that she is correct?"

Fay left the room without replying. Any word that she might have attempted to utter would have choked her.

Back in her own room, she endeavoured to find some light. But there was only one avenue of escape: that was to see Dick at once, and tell him that the moment for which he had waited was at hand.

She had done all she could; she had struggled as hard as was possible for a woman of her nature to struggle. Always, up to this point, when Wingate had been especially pressing, she had striven to avoid giving her definite promise to go away with him. Very hazily there had come into her mind the hope that perhaps the future would send a solution to this tangle of human lives.

Now the solution had come; and, dear God, what a solution it was! A man she had married in the hot impetuosity of youth, without proper thought or care, had come back from the very grave to mock her, to make her life a hell. . . .

But now she had come to the end. She would tell Dick of her final decision. Not another day could she lose: Michael Redding might spring his malicious secret at any moment. Before he did so, she must be away with Dick.

There was the girl Fraser to be considered also. She had never liked the girl, and had had occasion several times to reprimand her for grave faults. If she had considered the good name of the nursing-home only, she would have dismissed Nurse Fraser before this.

How devoutly she wished she had! Then the lesser of the two dangers with which she was surrounded would have disappeared. As it was, she was convinced that in this prying, ill-tempered girl with the voluptuous figure, she had a bitter and relentless enemy. How much this girl Fraser guessed, she did not know, but it was not merely imagination which made her think that the girl smiled evilly each time she saw the Matron pass into the private room, in answer to a peremptory summons from Michael Redding.

She could not tell Dick—he must not know:

at least, not until they were away. If he knew now, she might lose his love; he might turn from her in disgust. No, she dared not tell him. Dick's love was the only thing in life for her left—and she had to cling on to it.

Now that her mind was fully made up, she acted. Straight away, she sat down and wrote a letter of resignation, which she addressed to Lady Sally Doone.

She thanked the latter for the many wonderful kindnesses she had received, but stated that she found it impossible to continue her work at the nursing-home, and that therefore she had no alternative but to resign.

That Lady Sally would not be put off by this bareboned excuse she fully realized, but at the risk of losing her friendship, she would not be able to tell her the full truth unless Dick Wingate gave her permission to do so.

The envelope sealed, Fay felt that an intolerable weight had been lifted from her mind. The plaything of Fate she might be, but she looked hopefully into the future.

Selby Fowne, having read the short letter three times, placed it on his desk and leaned back wonderingly.

BEST OF STANDARD-BEARERS,

I am bored beyond expression down here, and am coming up to Town for some amusement.

If you possibly can, meet the train which gets in at 6.15 to-morrow (Thursday). We will go to the gayest place you know for dinner, do a show, and then on to Wyndham's Club to dance.

ISOBEL.

In spite of her unmistakable handwriting, it seemed almost impossible that Isobel Wingate could have written that letter. Its tone was so strange that Fowne knew she could scarcely have been normal. No mention was made of her husband, and there was an underlying recklessness which caused him to frown.

Nevertheless, the summons had come to him, and he must obey it. Not for a moment did he think of refusing to answer the call. It meant sacrificing his lunch, and working tremendously hard throughout the day; but when the 6.15 train drew in at the station, he was waiting on the platform.

A woman, whose beauty intoxicated him, stepped from a first-class carriage and waved a hand in greeting.

"Selby—you dear! I knew I could rely upon you!"

He assumed his jester's cap and bells.

"Always try to be on hand when I am wanted, Isobel."

Her gloved hand caught his arm.

"And I want you very badly indeed now, Selby!"

There was so much feeling in the words that he stood confused. What fresh thing had happened to cause her hurt?

"Does Dick know you're up?" he asked, the truth being he did not know what else to say.

The reply was astonishing.

"To-night has nothing to do with Dick. It belongs to me—to me, and—" she paused for a moment—"to you, Selby!"

Already he had schooled himself for an ordeal, and so his voice was steady enough as he replied: "Well, I don't see any earthly reason why the Standard-bearer should not accompany his liege lady on one night in the year!"

Beneath the banter, he was a man hard-pressed. The temptations which had been assailing him so desperately during the past few days returned in greater intensity. Although this woman was another man's wife, his love for her was as clean as a white flame. There was not now, just as there had never been, anything shameful in it. But was it possible that Isobel, deserted and betrayed by the man to whom she was bound, had resolved to turn to him? Then——

"The Standard-bearer has little thought for his liege lady," gently mocked a voice; "otherwise he would not look so abstracted."

Selby Fowne turned quickly.

"A million pardons, Isobel; now, tell me, where shall we go—Rimini's?"

She slipped her arm inside his.

"Rimini's will be delightful. I haven't been there for years. Dick"—she somewhat slurred the name—"always put me off when I suggested it. He seemed to imply that it was not altogether respectable. But," with a gay little laugh, "I shall be perfectly safe with my Standard-bearer."

"I should jolly well think so." Fowne led the way to his car, and a couple of minutes later they were threading through the traffic on the way to the West End.

Outside the Savoy, Isobel requested Fowne to stop.

"I must book a room," she said.

He recovered sufficiently from this fresh surprise to reply: "I'll do it for you."

Back in the car, he waited for an explanation.

"This is going to be a real night of adventure—that is why I am not going home."

"Of course, it will be too late for you to get back to Frinton."

It was the only reply her companion could think of.

"I may go back to-morrow—I don't know yet."

This was an Isobel he had never previously known. It was difficult to decide what to say to her, for it was evident that at last she was in revolt.

This surprising mood became more pronounced as the evening wore on. At dinner at the well-known Bohemian restaurant, Isobel attracted attention as much by her animation as by her beauty. An onlooker would have sworn that she and Fowne were lovers—although the man did not seem altogether sure of himself.

The truth was, of course, that Selby Fowne was distinctly uneasy. After the first overwhelming surprise, his knowledge of feminine nature told him that Isobel must be acting a part. She was out to achieve forgetfulness, and for him to force home any advantage in her present mood would be to deal her a cowardly blow. So he drove the tempter back again.

Yet he, too, had to play his part. So he responded in kind. With a heart very heavy, he smiled, giving no sign that he even guessed at the tragic truth. Here was a situation for the ironist: his friend's wife on the brink of making love to him—and he, still bound by honour, unable to reply!

"I wonder if anyone will see us, Selby?" Isobel asked, raising her glass of champagne.

"Surely our separate and joint reputations will survive the charge?"

The pulse in her white throat throbbed.

"It will not trouble me if they don't. Selby, do you know what I have been thinking?"

"What?" Yet he was almost afraid to listen.

"That I have been too staid all my life up till now—but that's going to be altered. Why shouldn't a woman enjoy life as well as a man?" She looked round the crowded room, which contained many men who were regarding her with interest.

"Women like you don't do that sort of thing, Isobel." He had spoken out of the fulness of his heart, and his voice was grave.

She looked for a moment as though he had said something which hurt her so keenly that she would never be able to forget it; and then, with the laugh which he knew to be forced, but which rang true enough, she replied: "I refuse to have my evening spoilt—even by you! What show are we going to, Selby?"

This was much safer ground, and Selby Fowne, rallying himself, started to expatiate upon the merits of the most recently produced successful revue.

Ten minutes later they left the restaurant, the cynosure of many eyes, and to the accompaniment of babbling tongues.

III

The telephone rang with a sharp insistence. Reaching out his hand, Wingate took off the receiver with a perfunctory "Yes?"

The next moment he leaned forward eagerly

in his chair. Forgetting that the zealous Hunter was in the adjoining room, possibly within earshot, he said quickly: "Darling! you're not joking with me? You really mean it? What—? But there is no need to go into that; the fact that you have decided is quite sufficient!

"Look here," he continued excitedly, "directly I have finished up here, I'll come along to your flat. . . . Will that be all right? Good!"

For some moments after he had replaced the receiver, Wingate remained lost in thought. Now that what he had pleaded for, had planned and fought for, to the total disregard of everything else, was an accomplished fact, he felt momentarily stunned. Although he had hoped that Fay's capitulation would be merely a question of time, the knowledge that she was willing to come to him—now, within an hour, perhaps—was overwhelming.

But Richard Wingate was not the type to be staggered long over anything. He had achieved so much, that success had become almost second nature to him. Once roused out of that short fit of dreaming, his keen brain started to fashion a path out of his present life.

He would go to America. In that wonderful city of New York, there would be almost limitless opportunities for a man of his qualifications. The thought of ever leaving London

had never before occurred to him, although he had had many invitations to do so. Paris, Berlin, Rome, Vienna—all these had beckoned, offering splendid inducements, but Harley Street would see him until the end of the chapter. So he had imagined. . . .

There would be much to do, of course; a man with his practice simply could not pack up at a moment's notice. Now it would be Fay's turn to be patient. Still—he smiled at the thought—she was scarcely likely to raise any objection to a week's delay.

Wingate smiled again as he pressed the bell.

"Hunter," he said to the perfect secretary, when the latter appeared, "I want to prepare you for a surprise."

"A surprise, Mr. Wingate?"

"Well, it may be a shock. I am thinking of leaving Harley Street."

"Leaving Harley Street, Mr. Wingate?"

Hunter's naturally pale face had blanched at the thought. "Do you think of retiring then, sir?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't afford to do that, Hunter. The truth is, I think of going to New York."

Hunter actually staggered under this fresh surprise.

"When—when do you think of going, sir?"

"Quite soon. We shall have some busy days

in front of us, Hunter—and, in the meantime, I don't want you to say a word of this to anyone. You understand?"

The secretary nodded and then went slowly out of the room.

At any other time, Wingate would have softened the blow by thinking of Hunter's future. The man had rendered him wonderful service during the last three years, and his like was probably not to be found in the whole of Harley Street. But now all Wingate's thoughts were centred on himself, and the woman waiting for him in the tiny flat at the back of Brook Street.

Directly he was free, he jumped into the waiting taxi, and, arriving at the flat, took Fay into his arms before she could say a word.

It was only when he noticed how pale she was that he said: "Fay, you're not afraid?"

The word "afraid" caused her to gasp.

"I don't want to think to-night, Dick," she replied agitatedly; "go home and dress and then come back here. I want some excitement to-night—excitement, and you!"

"Good!" Wingate smiled at her sympathetically. Yet that smile made Fay Dennison feel that she was not only a coward but something worse. The temptation came to her to risk all by telling him that the real reason of her promised consent was not so much love for him,

deep and sincere as it was, as fear caused by another man.

Then came a terrifying picture. She saw the smiling Wingate towering over her. Accusing words poured from his lips. . . . She mentally shrank from this vision.

"Why, you're trembling again! Fay, are you all right—or shall I give you something?"

She pushed the mists away.

"I'm quite all right—don't you worry, dear. Come back as quickly as you can. I'll be ready and waiting for you."

They dined at their favourite restaurant, went to the Alhambra, and then, at Wingate's suggestion, drove to Wyndham's Club.

That popular rendezvous of the sophisticated and the cosmopolitan was as crowded as usual. Yet, as he watched the shifting figures on the dance floor, Wingate saw only one man and one woman.

The woman was Isobel, his wife—and she was dancing with Selby Fowne.

CHAPTER IX

ON WITH THE DANCE

I

WINGATE'S stare of astonishment was so marked that several people looked at him in turn.

To find Isobel in Wyndham's Club was sufficiently startling, but to see her dancing with the man whom she knew had incurred his enmity roused in Wingate a sudden fury. He did not stop to consider that, in the circumstances, this feeling was somewhat incongruous, not to say one-sided; he only knew that he bitterly resented the sight.

After the first surprise, he noticed that his wife had changed. For one thing, she was wearing a much more daring evening-gown than he thought she possessed. There was a somewhat lavish display of neck and shoulders in consequence. Not that these weren't worth showing, or that Isobel offended in the slightest degree the canons of good taste—but he hated to see men turning round to notice her in the unmistakable way that a certain type will look at a strikingly attractive woman.

The shock of seeing Isobel drawing so much

open attention to herself was considerable, but that she apparently delighted, if not gloried, in having this attention was much greater. Isobel, although never a prude or a kill-joy, had always been of a reticent type; indeed, for a woman occupying her position in society, she had carefully avoided rather than sought public notice. What in the deuce was she doing there? And Fowne, too!

As he watched, he saw the couple swaying in the dance, drawing nearer. Over Selby Fowne's shoulder, Isobel's eyes looked straight into his. It seemed incredible, but there actually appeared a mocking light in them, as though she was challenging him.

This was intolerable; hadn't he specifically warned both Isobel and Fowne?—and he stepped forward.

Then his arm was touched.

"Dick, don't have any disturbance here."

Fay's warning pulled him up in time. It would have been unpardonable, of course, to have created a scene.

He conquered himself with an effort.

"All right, Fay," he said unsteadily; "but the confounded impudence of that fellow Fowne! Isobel should be at Frinton—yet here she is, dancing with a man I warned her to keep clear of!"

Fay made no reply. The possibility of a "scene"

in this crowded place had terrified her; even into this gay rendezvous, the sinister hand of Michael Redding seemed to stretch. She wanted to shrink into a corner and be ignored, rather than to be singled out and talked about.

Being a woman, she saw immediately the unfairness of Wingate's one-sided attitude. How true it was that men made their own laws—and that they considered themselves free to break these same laws when it suited them to do so!

She would have liked to have left the place, but she knew Dick's nature sufficiently well to realize that he would not go. The stiffening of his jaw muscles, together with his general attitude, convinced her of that.

Looking at him, she had a sharp pang of jealousy. Did Dick, after all, think so much of his wife—now that he saw her dancing with another man—that——

The music stopped. A general chatter arose, and, in the midst of this, she watched Isobel Wingate take her partner's arm before walking in their direction.

"Hullo, Dick!" Before her husband could reply, Isobel had turned to his companion.

"So glad, Miss Dennison, that you've been able to prevent my husband from being lonely."

Fay had to ignore the challenge—for challenge it was.

"Didn't you like Frinton, Mrs. Wingate?" What else could she say?

"I refused to stay banished," was the answer.

At this point, Wingate cut in.

"Apparently, Isobel, you refused to do other things that I wished." He glanced at Fowne, who was looking bewildered and uncomfortable.

His wife interpreted the remark with a swift:

"Feeling bored, I wrote to Selby to meet me. But I am afraid this is not my night for explanations. I am enjoying myself too much to waste time in talking."

"What—— ?"

But then the music started up again.

"Come, Selby—they're playing 'I wonder why ?' —*lovely !*"

Before the furious eyes of her husband, she led her partner away.

It was then Fay made her plea.

"Dick—let us go !"

He gave a short, hard laugh.

"We came here to dance—and we're going to dance."

Once she was on the perfect floor, swaying to the lilting dance time, Fay's mood changed. Previously, she had been uncertain, hesitant, but now she had a fresh and renewed resolution to snatch at joy, whatever the consequence. She had been sorry for Isobel before, but now her conscience was quietened by the fact that the wife she had always heard quoted as

being a model of propriety could so quickly console herself.

His wife though she was, Isobel could not love Dick with the force and intensity that she did! The thought sustained her.

At 1 a.m. Isobel and her partner were still dancing. They had taken supper together, and Isobel's laughter had drifted across the room.

Half an hour later, Wingate, looking round, could no longer see his wife. She had gone—and without a word.

Generally a very abstemious man, Wingate now ordered more wine. He drank thirstily.

"We will get away as soon as possible, Fay—I'm tired of London!"

She voiced her fear.

"You do not regret anything, Dick?"

His reply was swift and harsh.

"Regret? No, of course not! What should I regret?"

"Perhaps if I had not come back into your life, it would have been better—better for you, I mean. Sometimes I think that."

"Then you must stop thinking it. Your return was the greatest thing that has ever happened to me—I want you to believe that always."

"I will try, dear," she replied.

Wingate sat in the house which had become a shell. He had told Fay that he had no regrets,

but everything he saw, everything with which he was surrounded, reminded him of the wife with whom he had lived so many happy, if somewhat placid years. There were the etchings she had chosen for him, the tobacco jar, the wall bookcases——

He rose impatiently, kicking the rug away. Was he not the architect of his own life? Hadn't he always prided himself on that? Besides, Isobel had deliberately disobeyed him.

The letter which had been on his mind for so long had better be written; he would write it now.

Twenty minutes later, he read over the following:

My Dear Isobel,

I will confine myself to the essentials in this letter.

Some force out of my control has brought us to the parting of the ways.

After careful consideration, I have decided to leave London and live in New York. Fay Dennison will be going with me.

My regret is sincere. I wish you to believe that.

This letter is not to say good-bye—I shall see you, of course, and make adequate arrangements for your future.

Dick.

Reading it over a second time, Wingate decided that the tone was callous. It was the

letter of a man who had scarcely any decent feeling. And yet—what could he have said? The situation—cruel as it was to his wife—had to be faced, and it could not have been improved by his being sentimental or hypocritical. The blow had to be given: better for it to be decisive than to show a weakness which would only make his conduct seem the more contemptible.

Sealing the envelope, he realized that the die was cast. There could be no looking back now.

Did he want to?

II

Sensational news does not take long in spreading, and the information that Wingate, the nerve specialist, had decided to leave London for New York reached Selby Fowne not later than lunch the next day.

His informant was almost beside himself.

"But what is the chap's idea? He's established as the leading man in London—what more does he want?"

Fowne made an abstracted reply. He was not thinking of Wingate, but of Wingate's wife. Isobel had returned to Frinton at his earnest wish that morning. Did she know this news? Had Wingate written her? He must ascertain.

Ten minutes later he was in Harley Street.

Hunter regarded him nervously.

"Everything seems upside down, Mr. Fowne," he stammered; "will you please forgive me if I say that Mr. Wingate has— ?" He stopped, painfully confused.

". . . said that I wasn't to be admitted? Is that what you mean, Hunter?"

The secretary nodded.

"Everything seems upside down," he repeated. "I don't know what has come over Mr. Wingate. And it's all happened during the past month or so."

"Hunter, I want to ask you just one question —has Mr. Wingate said anything to you about going to New York?"

"Yes, sir. He had me into his room yesterday and told me that he thought of leaving London almost immediately—just as soon as he could settle up his affairs. I believe, sir, that the big Manchester man, Sir Anthony Dewhurst, has been given the first refusal of the practice. At least, I gathered so from a telegram I sent off this morning. Excuse me, Mr. Fowne—you know and believe, I trust, that I'm not asking out of any desire to pry—but what *has* happened to Mr. Wingate? Something has changed him entirely."

"Forty is an age at which many men change, Hunter."

Fowne had to content himself and the secretary by saying this. How could he tell

Hunter that the man for which he had such admiration had deliberately decided, not only to play shipwreck with his own life, but with the life of the woman he had sworn to cherish and shield all his days?

Besides, he had no time to lose; he must see Isobel, and ascertain what she was going to do in the future. Surely Wingate would see that she was provided for—but it was not the thought of money that caused him to frown. Money!—he had a sufficiency of money himself.

He had reached the hotel in time for dinner. Mrs. Wingate, he was informed, was in the grounds.

He found her dressed in a simple, silver-grey gown, which suited her quiet beauty admirably. She smiled as they shook hands.

"Selby, I think there must be a special Paradise set apart for men like you. It will be very small, because friends of your type are so few. I shall never forgive myself for dragging you away from your work in this way."

"There was some talk about Dick in London to-day, Isobel—and I felt I had to see you."

She surprised him by taking the news quite calmly.

"You mean about his going to New York? Yes, I know that; you see, I had a letter from Dick himself to-day."

Was there any limit to the amazing changes that a woman could show? This was an entirely different Isobel to the one with whom he had danced less than twenty-four hours previously.

"Do you know, Selby, I have become quite mature in wisdom during the last few weeks? I have learnt, for instance, that no woman can expect to go through life so happy as I was until this—happened."

"A woman like you deserves happiness all the time, Isobel." His voice almost broke.

"You say that, Selby, because you are my friend—the dearest, most splendid friend that any woman ever had! But I know now that continued happiness like mine could not be expected. Tell me, do you think this love"—in spite of her control, she stumbled over the word—"that Dick now has for Fay Dennison will last?"

"God knows," replied Selby Fowne helplessly.

"I feel sure it won't," he heard her say. "You wonder at me, no doubt, taking it so calmly—this thing which has uprooted my life and dealt me such a tremendous blow. But this afternoon, when I read Dick's letter, a new strength came to me. I cannot describe it, but it was as though God had sent me a special power—the power He gives to women, and

which must be unknown to men because they are so different. That is why, strange as it may sound to you, I still have faith in the future. Dick may go to New York—but he will come back—to you and to me. I regard his present mood as nothing more than a passing madness."

"I hope you are right, Isobel."

It was wonderful to hear her talk in such a quiet, restrained manner. Never, to his mind, had she shown her natural greatness of soul so finely as at that moment. It was as though she also could see the hand of fate in this wretched business, and was content to let Providence unravel the tangle in its own time.

"You are a marvellous woman," was his tribute.

She gave a little deprecating laugh.

"You have always set me on a pedestal, I am afraid, Selby; I am not marvellous at all; I am just a woman who has faith.

"Last night I was a very foolish woman; I thought that the best way to meet my trouble was to fight it; to show myself before the world, and demonstrate that I didn't care. But that desire has all gone now. I know it was wrong. God has told me that I must wait."

He could find nothing to say. Selby felt he was in the presence of someone infinitely noble. Looking at Isobel, noting the quiet serenity

in her eyes, hearing that unshakable confidence in her voice, any criticism of Wingate was stilled. The human drama in which he was playing his part seemed to take on a new significance; for the first time he could trace in it the working out of some mysterious plan.

"After dinner, you must get back to Town, Selby. It is splendid of you thinking of me like this, but I cannot allow you to give any more of your valuable time to my affairs. Why, what will your patients be saying?"

"But you must have someone with you at a time like this!" he protested; "if your people were alive, it wouldn't be so bad——"

In the way which had become so familiar but which gave him now a yet more deadly pain, she caught his arm.

"I forbid you to worry about me any more, Selby. Lady Sally may be down to-morrow."

With that he had to be content.

III

It was Fay's last night at the nursing-home. For seven long, infinitely weary days and nights she had continued to carry her burden. Dick had asked her to give him a week in which to settle up his professional affairs.

In an hour she would be free!—free of every-

thing which had now become abhorrent. She would be free of the stealthy menace of Michael Redding's veiled threats; she would be free of the ceaseless questioning of Lady Sally Doone; free of the suspicious glances of the staff, who must have read at least one of her secrets long before this. Above all, she would be free of those conscience-voices which had given her so many pangs. In action she would find peace.

The time was eight o'clock; at nine she was to meet Dick in the vestibule of the Hercules Hotel. Just sixty more minutes.

She had remained on duty until the very last moment, firstly because she had promised Lady Sally to leave everything in working order for her successor, and secondly, because she wished her thoughts occupied.

She had told Lady Sally she was going back to America; that was all. If, as she no doubt did, Lady Sally associated her return to the States with the news that Dick Wingate was going to leave London, she must form her own conclusions. Five days before she had informed Lady Sally that she resolutely refused to discuss her decision.

"I am very, very grateful for your friendship, and all that it has meant to me, but my future belongs to myself, Lady Sally, and I cannot allow anyone to influence it against my will."

To this Lady Sally had not replied. There

had been no hard words, but Fay had felt that the older woman had been able to read her most inmost and secret thoughts.

But what did it matter now? Soon she would be away.

She had just one more task to do—her last of any importance. Strange that this final duty should be to—Michael Redding.

When she went into the room to give him the morphia injection which had been ordered by Wingate, the man seemed scarcely to notice her. He appeared drowsy.

It was with a tremendous feeling of relief that, the office performed, she left the room. She hoped—and believed—that she would never see Michael Redding's face again.

How the minutes dragged! There were still twenty of them to be ticked away before she could leave. At a quarter to nine the new Matron was to report for duty and "take over."

Waiting in that room, every item in which had become so familiar to her, Fay suddenly had an uncomfortable presentiment of evil. Why this impression of approaching calamity should have come to her she could not tell, but the feeling was very strong.

So strong that she rose to put on her hat. At all costs—even if it meant going back on her word—she must leave the nursing-home

immediately—instantly! The place contained something which was getting ready to spring on her; something unspeakably vile and dreadful. . . .

With trembling fingers she put on her hat and coat, and picked up the small leather bag. She had opened the door of the room and was already out in the corridor when——

"*Murderess!*"

The word had been screamed at her! Raved by a creature wearing nurse's uniform.

The girl Fraser!

Fay had known that Fraser hated her, but what could be the meaning of this monstrous attack?

Behind her accuser were grouped a number of other people. There was Doctor Horton, the night visiting physician, looking bewildered and very uneasy, while six other nurses, standing behind Fraser, stared—and stared. . . .

After that first moment of terrible surprise, Fay answered the challenge.

"Have you gone mad, Nurse Fraser? Can you possibly realize what you are saying? Answer me, or I will telephone for the police!"

"The police! You dare not!"

Fay turned to the doctor. Her conviction now was that the nurse had really lost her reason.

"Can you give me any explanation, Doctor Horton?"

The physician fidgeted with his collar.

"The patient, Michael Redding, is dead," he said.

Fay was unable to control her astonishment.

"Dead?" she repeated.

"And you killed him!" Nurse Fraser had returned to her charge. She thrust a piece of paper in front of Fay Dennison's face, adding: "Here is the proof!"

"Let me see that paper." Fay felt that she had become the central figure in a phantasmagoric scene that baffled solution, but she realized at the same time that she must smash immediately this dastardly plot which was meant to ruin her. What was written on that paper?

"Let you see it! Not likely! Your friends, the police, are the only people I am going to allow to see this!"

Once again Fay turned to the physician.

"This has gone on long enough," she said; "Doctor, will you please be good enough to telephone to the nearest police-station?"

The medical man became even more painfully confused.

"But, Miss Dennison, there is the nursing-home to be thought of—yourself——"

"I am accused of killing a patient!"

"Mr. Redding was your husband! Can you deny that?" demanded Nurse Fraser.

The words brought a gasp of astonishment

to the lips of every listener. Doctor Horton, whose habit of talking to himself was well known, was heard to murmur: "But this is even more serious. . . ."

Without replying, Fay turned and walked back into her room, pursued by the words from her accuser: "She mustn't get away—don't let her get away!"

She lifted the telephone receiver and said the single, significant, ominous word—"Police!"

Replacing the receiver for a moment, she lifted it again from its hook.

"This is such a serious matter that Lady Sally Doone must be informed at once," she explained to Doctor Horton, standing in the doorway.

"Yes," agreed the physician, "I think Lady Doone must know; now," as Fay, after delivering a message, hung up the receiver, "permit me to ask you a few questions——"

He was sharply interrupted.

"I must refuse to say anything until the police arrive."

As she spoke, Fay heard the clock on the mantelpiece strike nine.

The die was cast, and there could be no turning back.

Wingate, arriving at the Hercules Hotel at 8.30 that evening, had written the words in the register, "Mr. and Mrs. Richard Wingate,"

before proceeding to the smoking-room to kill the thirty minutes which must elapse before Fay could join him.

Thirty minutes would pass quickly enough, he thought, as he lit a cigar and started to read the evening paper.

Half of his cigar was consumed when——

"Mr. Wingate?"

A waiter was looking down at him.

"I'm Mr. Wingate. What do you want?"

"There is a lady in the hall, sir."

Wingate sprang up. Fay was on time.

"Thank you," he said briskly. And made his way quickly out of the room.

But the woman he greeted a few moments later was not Fay Dennison. Looking sterner than he had ever seen her, Lady Sally Doone said stiffly: "Dick, I command you to give me ten minutes!"

Against his will, Wingate nodded before leading the way into the hotel drawing-room.

This vast apartment was practically empty. After piloting his companion to a deserted corner, he said in a tone that matched her own: "I think I know why you have come, Lady Sally. Without wishing to be discourteous, I want to say that a very few minutes is all the time I can spare you."

The small gloved hand that removed a lace-edged handkerchief from the black silk bag

shook, as Lady Sally patted first her forehead and then her lips.

"This afternoon," the visitor said, "I did a thing of which I should not have thought myself capable. I allowed myself to listen to a conversation which did not concern me. Whilst waiting to get through to you at Harley Street, I heard you talking to the manager of this hotel. You were confirming the booking of a room for yourself and—your wife. Isobel is still at Frinton; I was speaking to her on the telephone only half an hour ago."

"Well?"

Wingate's reply was uncompromising.

"I know why you want to get rid of me, Richard Wingate. Within a few minutes, my niece, Fay Dennison, is due to join you here. It will be the first step to the ruination of at least two, and, probably, three lives. At this eleventh hour I implore you, Richard, to prove yourself the man I have up till now held in such affection and esteem."

"I am sorry, Lady Sally, but my plans are made. I have practically sold my practice, and I sail to-morrow for New York."

"You realize, of course, that you will break your dear wife's heart?"

Wingate's face stiffened.

"I may have lost both your affection and your esteem, Lady Sally—God knows that to have

done so is not a pleasant thought—but I want you to believe, all the same, that I did not take this step without the most careful thought for Isobel. I will tell you something now which you didn't know previously—I was in love with Fay Dennison long before I knew Isobel. I asked her to marry me in the last year of the war, but she refused.

"There are some forces, Lady Sally, which we cannot control—I have tried not to be a cad—and there," rising as he spoke, "this conversation must end."

Lady Sally rose too.

"It is a cad's trick, Richard Wingate, to desert a true and loving wife! For the last time I humble my pride in appealing to you."

"And for the last time I refuse to allow you to interfere in my affairs. Permit me to see you to your car, Lady Sally."

A page-boy came hurrying.

"Mr. Wingate—Mr. Wingate—" he called, as he burst into the room.

"What do you want?" Wingate demanded irritably.

"The Dunheved Nursing-home wants you on the telephone, sir."

Instantly his mind became focussed.

Fay!

For the second time she had funked it.

CHAPTER X

IN THE MESH

I

THE tramp of these men's heavy boots shattered the silence.

The foremost—the one wearing plain clothes—spoke abruptly.

"I am Detective-Inspector Morris from Gadge Street Police-station. Someone telephoned five minutes ago——"

"It was I who telephoned, Inspector," said Fay Dennison.

The detective turned, noticed that the constable he had brought in with him was standing by the door, and then faced the speaker again.

"And who are you, Miss, if you please?"

"I am the Matron of this, the Dunheved Nursing-home. My name is Fay Dennison."

After writing in his notebook, the detective-inspector asked the all-important question:

"Why did you phone for the police, Miss Dennison?"

Nurse Fraser was about to speak, but her arm was seized by Dr. Horton.

"Be quiet!" he ordered sharply; "the time will come for you——"

"Now, Miss Dennison—I am waiting," said the Inspector.

Fay's voice was clear and unfaltering.

"My husband, who was a patient in this nursing-home, has died here to-night. This nurse," looking at Fraser, "has accused me of being the cause of his death. It is untrue, and I decided the matter must be cleared up immediately; that is why I telephoned to the police."

Used as he was to startling situations, Detective-Inspector Morris raised his eyebrows.

"If I may say so, Miss Dennison, you did the right thing. Are you the Doctor in charge of the patient?" he inquired, turning to Horton.

"I am the night visiting physician. The patient in question was in the care of Mr. Richard Wingate, the well-known nerve specialist."

"Can he be got on the telephone? If so, please ask him to come round here at once. And now, please, I want the room cleared of everyone but you, Miss Dennison, you, Nurse," looking at Fraser, "and you, Doctor."

Reluctantly and with many backward glances, the wide-eyed nurses filed from the room.

After they were gone, the Inspector spoke to the medical man.

"I must see the body," he said.

When the four of them were in that room of death, Morris turned to the constable.

"Admit no one, Sanders, without my permission.

"The body has not been disturbed?" he went on to inquire of Doctor Horton.

"Not to my knowledge. The man has been dead for about forty minutes."

"What was the cause of death?"

"Without definitely committing myself, I should say that he died through an overdose of morphia."

The Inspector nodded, and then, walking to the small table placed by the side of the bed, he pulled out the top drawer.

When his hand came away, it held something.

"Morphia tablets—surely, Doctor, a dangerous drug like this should be kept under proper control?"

The Doctor's reply was sharp and incisive.

"Most certainly it should. Matron," turning on Fay, "can you account for that tube of tablets being there?"

Three pairs of eyes were drilling into her soul.

"I cannot account for them being there."

The detective-inspector took up the questioning.

"Who is responsible for the safe custody of dangerous drugs such as these?"

"I am."

"Do you keep them under lock and key?"

"Of course."

"Then can you give any idea why these," tapping the tube, "should have been left lying about in this careless fashion? Even the drawer was not properly shut."

"I have already told you that I cannot

account for it—unless," and here the speaker's eyes became fixed on Nurse Fraser, "someone stole my keys."

"Would that be possible? Where do you keep your keys, Miss Dennison?"

"My hospital keys hang from hooks on a baize board in my private room. Of course, no one is supposed to enter that room in my absence, but as the door is never locked, it would be a simple matter for anyone of the hospital staff to take the keys."

"I must speak! Inspector, let me speak!"

Nurse Fraser had stepped forward. Her blazing eyes fixed on Morris.

"She is trying to shield herself—but here is proof that she did it."

The speaker held out a piece of paper.

The Inspector took it after looking intently at the girl.

A change came over his face as he smoothed the paper out and read.

"Miss Dennison." A change, too, had come into his voice.

In answer to the command, Fay walked to the man's side.

"Will you please read that, and then let me know if you recognize the handwriting?"

"I believe it to be the writing of my husband, Michael Redding," was the reply, after a pause Although what she had read had turned her hear

to ice, Fay had unhesitatingly told the truth. That message—wicked, fiendishly untrue as it was—had cast the shadow of the gallows over her; yet, because she knew herself to be entirely innocent, she gave the reply for which the detective-inspector was hungering.

"You say that it is the writing of the dead man who was your husband?"

"To the best of my belief, it is."

Morris turned to Nurse Fraser.

"Where did you find this note?"

With a look of hatred towards the woman whom she had accused, the nurse made the following reply: "At eight-twenty-five to-night I was passing this room when I heard a sound. It was like a man gasping for breath. Knowing Mr. Redding to be very seriously ill, I opened the door and went to the bed. As I reached this spot," the speaker moved to illustrate her words, "I noticed Mr. Redding's head collapse sideways on the pillow. I spoke to him, but he did not answer. Then," her voice rising, "I found that he was dead! This was only a few minutes after the Matron had given him a morphia injection."

The Inspector swung round.

"Did you give the dead man a morphia injection to-night, Matron?"

"Yes."

"At your own discretion?"

"No, by order of the specialist in charge of the case."

The door opened.

"Lady Sarah Doone and Mr. Richard Wingate are here, Inspector," announced Constable Sanders.

"Wingate—that's the specialist you mentioned, isn't it, Doctor?"

"Yes. Mr. Wingate is the nerve specialist who was in charge of the case. Lady Sarah Doone is the owner of the nursing-home."

"I telephoned her immediately after I got through to the police," explained Fay Dennison. "She was not at home, so I left a message asking her to come here immediately upon her return."

The Inspector gave the speaker a curious glance before addressing the constable.

"Show Lady Sarah Doone and Mr. Richard Wingate in at once, Sanders."

"Very good, Inspector."

As her eyes sought the face of the man she loved, Fay had two overwhelming desires. The first was to cry: "Have faith in me, Dick!" and the second was to dispense with words altogether and fling herself into Wingate's arms. She was forced to conquer both.

"What has happened here?"

Wingate had entered in the manner of a masterful man determined to clear up a mystery. After one brief glance at Fay—a glance which added to

her already terrible load—he concentrated his attention on Morris.

The latter was not to be ruffled nor browbeaten. He answered one question by asking another.

"Are you Mr. Richard Wingate, the nerve specialist?"

"I am."

"You are a consultant at this nursing-home?"

"Yes—yes—and who in the deuce are you, sir?"

"Detective-Inspector Morris of Gadge Street Police-station—that's who I am. And now I must please ask you, Mr. Wingate, to continue answering my questions."

"Please be quick, then. I have an urgent appointment.

The look which the speaker sent in Fay Dennison's direction was not lost upon his interrogator.

"You were the specialist in charge of the Michael Redding case at this nursing-home?"

"I was—" Wingate's eyes turned to the bed. "Is the man dead?"

"He died at, roughly, 8.25 this evening—and I am here investigating the cause of his death. That is why I have to ask you certain questions."

Wingate looked amazed.

"Investigating his death?" he repeated; "but the man was very ill!"

"Ill enough to die?" asked the Inspector.

"He was very ill," repeated Wingate. "That should be a good enough answer for you, Inspector."

Morris's lips twisted themselves into a faint grimace. The man looked then what he was—a creature of the law: grim, tenacious, unrelenting, remorseless: a hunter determined to find his prey.

"In the somewhat peculiar circumstances, I'm afraid it's not," was the answer.

Wingate stepped forward and seized the detective by the shoulder.

"What do you mean? Are you hinting there has been any foul play?"

Before the Inspector could reply, a high-pitched feminine voice had broken in upon the duologue.

"Foul play! In my nursing-home! What nonsense are you suggesting, Inspector?" Lady Sally Doone, speechless with astonishment until now, had at last found her voice.

"Time will show if it's nonsense, m'lady. A definite charge of foul play—not to mince words, of murder—is alleged in this case——"

"Murder? The person must be mad! Who brings the charge? And against whom, pray?"

A voice, hysterical with passion, answered:

"I bring the charge, my lady," said Nurse Fraser, "and I accuse the Matron."

"Fay!"

"I need scarcely say, Lady Sally, that it is a monstrous lie!"

The harsh voice of the Inspector burst out again.

"Lie or not, the charge must be investigated." He turned to the nurse.

"Where did you find this note?"

"Behind this table." She pointed to the bedside.

"What note is that, Inspector?" Lady Sally's high-pitched voice appeared to grate on Morris's nerves. With an angry gesture, he replied: "This note, which Miss Dennison has identified as being in the handwriting of the dead man, was found, as you have heard, by this witness," looking at Nurse Fraser, "shortly after she discovered that Mr. Redding was dead, at 8.25 to-night. Is that correct?"

"Quite correct," replied the nurse.

"I'll read you the note," now said the Inspector.

"No! No!—don't read it!—don't read it!"

It was Wingate's arm that saved Fay from falling.

"Why, what harm can there be in the note? You're not afraid to face a filthy lie, Fay! I promise you that this policeman-fellow can do you no harm."

The policeman-fellow gave another of his mirthless smiles.

"Perhaps, after all, you will prefer me not to read the note?"

The words were construed by Wingate as a sneering challenge to himself. He answered it immediately.

"Read it by all means if it will give you any

satisfaction, Inspector." He felt Fay's body droop in his arms.

Breaking a silence which seemed to throb, Morris read from the paper he held in his left hand.

> "They have me in their power. A double dose, and they will be free to marry. She is my wife—God help me!"

"Who wrote this?"

Wingate had leapt forward. His face was convulsed, and his left hand clutched the detective-inspector's shoulder.

Morris swung round, shaking himself free.

"Miss Dennison has stated that it was written by the dead man," he replied.

"Richard!" a voice called. "This is such a serious matter that I suggest neither you nor Fay say another word to this policeman until you have taken the advice of a solicitor. I will ring up Matthew Barrington. Have you any objection, Inspector, to my leaving the room to use the telephone?" Lady Sally added, looking at Morris.

"I have no objection at all, m'lady," was the answer.

Lady Sally gone, Wingate turned to Morris again.

"Who found this note?"

"Nurse Fraser here."

"You didn't happen to write it, I suppose?" demanded the specialist.

The girl sneered.

"You both know who wrote it—and why he wrote it!" She glared at Fay Dennison as she spoke.

"I refuse to discuss the matter with you," sharply rejoined Wingate.

Lady Sally Doone soon returned to the room with the information that she had been fortunate enough to catch Matthew Barrington at home, and that the well-known solicitor would arrive within a few minutes.

"Need we stay here?" asked Wingate.

"It is not necessary," replied the detective-inspector; "but the constable will be placed on guard, and no one will be allowed to enter this room."

By the time the party had reached Lady Sally Doone's private apartment in the nursing-home, the arrival of Mr. Matthew Barrington was announced.

Matthew Barrington was one of the best-known men in London. He was celebrated as "the Society solicitor." A man verging on sixty years of age, he looked the picture of health, and the quintessence of good breeding. It was commonly stated that a famous publishing house had invited him to name his own terms for a volume of reminiscences. To the immense relief of Mayfair, Barrington had refused the offer, although he modestly admitted that a volume of his memoirs would probably have made "interesting reading."

Interesting reading! Barrington had been on the "inside" of practically every important *cause célèbre* for the last twenty-five years. He carried secrets which would have shaken to their foundations ducal mansions and millionaires' homes. Small wonder that Mayfair had sighed in relief when Matthew Barrington decided not to write his memoirs!

Barrington looked perturbed when he heard of the situation to which he had been called.

"You will act for my niece—and for Mr. Wingate if necessary, of course," said Lady Sally, in her imperious way.

"Of course," replied the solicitor, wondering how he could find time to take on this fresh startling case.

He turned sharply to the detective.

"What do you propose to do, Inspector?"

"On the evidence already in my possession, Mr. Barrington, I must arrest Miss Fay Dennison, the Matron of this nursing-home, on a charge relating to the death of Mr. Michael Redding, her husband."

"What?"

Wingate would have said much more had he not felt a restraining hand on his arm.

"Have faith in me, Wingate," said Matthew Barrington.

Over the solicitor's broad shoulder the nerve specialist looked at Fay Dennison. Her face

was haggard with pain, but in her eyes was a great appeal.

Her lips moved to utter a word.

It was "Dick."

II

The weight of Matthew Barrington's name, combined with the wealth of Lady Sally Doone, had enabled Fay Dennison to spend the night in her aunt's Brook Street residence instead of in a police court cell.

Matthew Barrington had gone home, and Lady Sally had left the room at the request of Fay, who was now displaying a fortitude that was astonishing.

"You know I am innocent, Dick ?" she asked.

"Of course! Why do you say that ?"

"I say it because you might think—even you, the man who has loved me—that if I could deceive you in one thing, I might in another. No, please let me go on, Dick," as Wingate made an impatient gesture. "I want to tell you why I kept the secret of Michael Redding from you. In a word, I was afraid."

"Afraid ? Of me ?"

"Yes, Dick—of you. I was afraid that if you learned that that dreadful man—he was that, although I hope that God will now have mercy on his soul—was my husband, you might be disgusted. Your love was my all,

I had nothing else to live for, and at the possibility of losing it, I became a coward. Can you understand that, Dick? And will you—— ?"

He took her two hands in his.

"Fay, I don't want you to say another word. From the first day I met you, you have always been my wonder-woman. You are still my wonder-woman. Is that sufficient?"

"It's more than sufficient, Dick. It fills me with courage and faith. There is a dreadful time before me—but I shall go through it all, feeling that everything will come right. My regret, dear, is not for myself—it is for you."

Tears blinded her as she said: "This will ruin you, Dick! And I shall have been the cause of it!"

"Ruined!" He snapped out the word. "Nothing will ruin me as long as I have my brain, my knowledge, and my two hands! Surely you don't think that one filthy lie—or a thousand filthy lies—can destroy the happiness of you and I?

"Let me tell you this, my dear: I wanted something, some upheaval, to prove to you how much I loved you. You know I'm no Puritan; you know that I was willing to snap my fingers at the world, and take you away in the sight of the shrieking jackals that compose this so-called London Society—but, whilst I

was determined to do this, I felt somehow ashamed."

"Ashamed, Dick?"

"Ashamed because I considered I was dragging you down. From the first I have been very selfish, pressing you on, driving a hard bargain, I am afraid, but now—now, Fay, I'll try to prove myself worthy of you! Together, we'll fight this filth—fight it, and come through clean! The world will throw mud—but what do we care for the world?"

"Dick, I feel strength flowing into me! Oh, Dick—what a man you are!"

There was silence for a few moments.

"Now tell me about this—Michael Redding. I want to know his type. Despicable, I suppose? A man, it struck me, who sneered at everything decent."

"I married him when I was twenty, shortly after the war, when I went over to America. I had to cut you out of my thoughts because I was afraid then that your affection for me was merely 'of the war,' as we used to say. Young as I was, I had seen so many disastrous war-marriages that—well, I simply couldn't face the possibility of ours being a mistake.

"For at least two years after the war I lived in a sort of daze. Looking back, I know now that I was not entirely responsible for my actions; I was just—limp.

"It was during this period that Michael Redding came to visit the people I was then staying with at Great Neck, Long Island. Alice Passmore, who had given me a home because she had been a great friend of my dead mother, was fascinated by Redding. At that time, on the surface at least, he would have fascinated many women. He was rich, well-connected, played many sports, and was generally run after.

"He made violent love to me from the first, and Alice Passmore encouraged him. She could not talk of anything else, continually telling me what a splendid match I could make.

"I want you to try to realize my position, Dick. I had very little money of my own, and the war had sickened me, for the time being at least, of earning my living as a nurse. Consequently, I was more or less dependent on the Passmores' good nature—which, I must say, was boundless.

"How does a girl drift into a marriage such as mine? Looking back again, I scarcely know myself. At least, I was honest with Michael Redding. I told him that I had met a man in the war whom I could never forget. He pretended to be very sympathetic, and said that if only I would marry him he would be content with very little."

Her voice drooped.

"You needn't go on," Wingate said.

"Yes, I want to tell you the rest." She paused again for a few seconds.

"I never knew that any living creature could be so vile as Michael Redding proved himself. I lived with him only six months—and those six months were——"

A shudder went through her body.

"I won't say any more about that part, Dick. I could have gone back to the Passmores, once I had broken away from that man, but instead I took a post as nurse-companion to a lady who was a great traveller.

"It was while we were in Yokohama, two years ago, that I read in the *New York Herald* that Michael Redding was amongst the killed in a Californian train smash. The relief I felt! And then—a fortnight ago—to find that he was still alive—and that Fate had sent him to the Dunheved Nursing-home! If this were a story instead of real life, Dick, would it be believed?"

"What matters is that I believe you," was the answer.

"That is what I longed for you to say, Dick. And now, dear, you must go."

At the thought of what awaited her in the morning, Wingate felt that his heart would burst.

It was the woman who showed the higher

courage, smiling out of a face that had recently been a mask of tragedy.

"Nothing can frighten me now!"

III

Returning to the room, Fay felt some of her new-found strength leaving her. Richard Wingate was not the only person on whom she had brought disgrace and notoriety: there was Lady Sally. The latter's proud spirit would chafe intolerably under the stigma which her close association with this scandal would necessarily entail.

Yet, when her aunt entered a few moments later, there was no note of reproach in Lady Sally's voice.

"Fay, for the time being—until this distressing business is over, I mean, and your name and character have been cleared—we must both forget our differences. I won't distress you now, my dear, by referring to the tremendous step you were going to take to-night; I will only say that I believe in you from the bottom of my heart, that I feel I have never loved you so deeply as I do at this moment, and that I am backing you for all I am worth."

"Lady Sally, you're far too good to me. If I could only try to thank you——"

"Don't start!" was the brisk response;

"you've had a frightfully trying time and I'm going to tuck you into bed myself."

In this large room with the littered floor was a desk on which were many telephones.

One of these now buzzed, and the man with keen eyes moved quickly from his position by the fire.

"Yes?" he demanded crisply.

"Is that you, Stanhope?" came an eager voice from the other end of the wire. "This is Harrap—I've got a first-rate story!"

"Good! Where are you now?"

"Scotland Yard. The news has just come in that there's been some trouble at a big West End Nursing-home called the Dunheved, in Raymond Street. A patient died there mysteriously, and one of the nurses has accused the Matron of being mixed up in it. Apparently, the dead man was her husband, although no one knew about it. There's going to be an inquest——"

The night news-editor of the *Daily Megaphone* did not wait for anything more. It had been a "dead" night—nothing appeared to be stirring at all—but here was a first-rate sensation.

"Cut back at once and write it, Harrap!" he ordered; "in the meantime, I'll get busy this end."

Philip Stanhope rang a bell, and a boy in uniform came hurrying.

"Tell Mr. Money I want to see him!"

With this brisk injunction the messenger-boy rushed away—everyone rushed in the *Daily Megaphone* office: it was part of the system instituted by the dynamic founder of the famous newspaper—to return within a minute, accompanied by a mammoth of a man with a round, babyish, vacant-looking face.

"Here's a good story for you to follow up, Money," said the night news-editor. "There has been a death at the Dunheved Nursing-home in Raymond Street to-night. One of the nurses has made an accusation against the Matron, and the police have been called in. Harrap's just phoned this from the Yard. Get up to the nursing-home and find out the facts. We shall have to be careful what we publish, because no one's been definitely charged yet, of course, and there's an inquest to be held—but it promises to be a nailing good story."

"Yes." The vacant expression in the babyish face had gone, to be replaced by a look of alertness that matched the news-editor's own. Horatio Money, in spite of his preposterous name and equally preposterous figure, was the most successful news-gatherer in Fleet Street. The more difficult a case, the more he gloried in bringing back "the facts."

"Right, Stanhope!" he said.

. . . . .

The result of Money's investigations was seen in the next morning's edition of the *Daily Megaphone*.

In big type, on the top of the right-hand column, on the principal news-page, ran the headlines :

WEST END SENSATION
DEATH AT WELL-KNOWN NURSING-HOME
INQUEST TO BE HELD

The *Daily Megaphone* understands that, in consequence of a telephone message, Det.-Inspector Morris, of Gadge Street Police-station, paid a visit to the Dunheved Nursing-home in Raymond Street last evening at nine o'clock.

It is understood that an inquest will be held at an early date on the body of Mr. Michael Redding, a patient who died at the nursing-home shortly before Det.-Inspector Morris paid his visit.

We understand that, in connection with this man's death, a highly-sensational statement involving a high official of the nursing-home has been made by a nurse at the Home.

Dramatic developments are expected.

. . . . .

The Dunheved Nursing-home was started quite recently by Lady Sarah Doone, a wealthy Society woman, who is well known for her philanthropic activities. No money was spared on its equipment, and the nursing-home is considered to be one of the best in London.

Its list of consultants is a distinguished one, and includes the name of Mr. Richard Wingate, the nerve specialist, of 700B Harley Street, in whose charge Mr. Michael Redding is stated to have been.

The world read the news.
Including—
Isobel Wingate.

CHAPTER XI

THE VERDICT

I

THE news published by the *Daily Megaphone* that morning proved greatly to the public's liking. For here was a case dear to the heart of the average reader. It contained practically all the elements that go to make up those throbbing human dramas, which achieve the distinction of blazing headlines and plenty of space.

"Of course," said the average reader, as he or she laid down the paper, "this matron woman murdered her husband because she wanted him out of the way. Probably she was in love with the specialist Wingate. The *Megaphone* says it as plainly as it dares."

Everything conduced to making the case worth while from the newspapers' point of view. There is no keener judge of human nature than the editor of a great newspaper; and, without exception, the word went forth from all the big editorial rooms in Fleet Street "to 'run' the nursing-home story for all it was worth."

It had chanced that good—which is only

another term for sensational—news had been scarce for some time, and so the newspapers regarded the affair almost as though it had been sent them by a merciful Providence. The position of the principal characters in the case, the hint of illicit passion, had conspired to bring to the wretched business the utmost publicity.

Isobel Wingate allowed her breakfast to grow cold, and the food was untouched long after she had put the newspaper aside.

Her feelings were so mixed that she could not sort out her impressions. Then, shutting out everything else, came the fear that her husband's professional good name would be sacrificed in this tragedy.

She must get at the truth.

Twenty minutes after leaving the breakfast-table—where all that she had taken was a cup of coffee—Isobel was speaking on the telephone to Selby Fowne—how natural it seemed that she should once again call upon his help and advice in a time of crisis!

"What does it all mean—that news in the paper this morning?" she inquired anxiously.

She heard Fowne cough.

"You mustn't worry, Isobel," was the reply; "it seems to me as though the nurse, Fraser, has invented this story in order to have her revenge upon Fay—Miss Dennison. If you like, I will get into touch with Dick and tell him

that I am at his disposal, should he like me to do anything."

"Oh, Selby!—will you?"

"Of course."

But when Selby telephoned a minute later to Hamilton Circus, he was told that "Mr. Wingate was engaged."

For the rest of the morning, Isobel endeavoured to control her thoughts. This proved impossible. The mental picture of the ordeal which awaited Dick would not be dismissed.

At lunch she decided that this remaining at a distance was impossible, and she caught the next train to Town.

Engaging a room at the Savoy, she rang up Lady Sally immediately.

"Darling, I must see you," she said over the wire. "Selby thought it was better I should stay on at Frinton, but I found that impossible. Do come along and talk to me."

"Of course, my poor sweet!" was the reply; "as a matter of fact, Selby has just come in—shall I bring him along?"

"Yes, do, darling!"

Replacing the receiver, Isobel sat with folded hands for at least two minutes.

Then she lifted the receiver again.

"Langham 10,000," she ordered.

"Yes?" inquired a voice which caused her heart to leap violently.

"Dick," she said immediately, "this is Isobel. I am speaking from the Savoy, where I am staying. Dick, I don't want to intrude, but if there is anything I can do, please, please let me do it!"

She fancied she could hear a faint groan.

Then:

"Isobel, you must keep out of this. I won't have you mixed up in the affair at all. Best thanks, old girl, all the same."

"Dick—it's not true?"

"Those damned insinuations in the papers? Not one of them's true; they're a mass of filthy lies!"

"Thank God! I knew they were"—and then, because she could not stand the strain of speaking to her own husband as though he were a stranger, she rang off. She had made her offer; if Dick wanted her he could call or write—not that he would do either, she felt sure.

Within ten minutes her two best friends were with her.

Lady Sally, taking both hands, kissed her affectionately.

"My poor child," she said, "how sorry I am you should have been dragged into this!"

Isobel patted one of the small, still beautiful hands.

"Listen, darling, I have prepared myself for almost anything. I know quite well that I have lost Dick's love; I feel that I shall never regain

it, but, nevertheless, I feel I must do anything I can to help him. I telephoned him just now and made that offer."

"What did he say?" put in Selby Fowne. "I phoned him myself this morning—but I was told he was engaged!" The speaker could not keep a certain bitterness out of his tone.

"Poor old Selby!" Isobel smiled sadly at him. "I received very much the same treatment. Dick told me I must keep out of the affair. He would not have me mixed up in it."

"That shows that he hasn't lost all his old decency," commented Lady Sally.

"But I feel I cannot keep out of it," persisted Isobel. "Although I have lost Dick's love, he is still my husband. Tell me, what can I do?"

Selby Fowne shook his head.

"Nothing, I am afraid, Isobel; none of us can do anything, so far as I can see. It is not a question of being willing—we are all willing enough, God knows—but the Law has the only word now."

"Rest assured, darling, that everything that can be done is being done," said Lady Sally. "For one thing, I have engaged Matthew Barrington, who is quite the best solicitor in London. Already, he told me this morning, he has made arrangements with Sir Thomas Langton, the K.C."

Isobel gasped.

"Do you think there will be a trial?" In that moment she felt as sorry for Fay Dennison as she did for Dick.

"We must face that possibility, of course," was the answer. "We all know that Fay could not have done that terrible thing, but if the jury at the inquest return a verdict of anything but accidental death, Fay will have to take her trial. It is a horrible thought, but we shall only be deceiving ourselves if we think otherwise."

At last the first of the ordeals had come. The inquest was fixed for ten o'clock on the morning of the third day after the tragedy. Lady Sally and Selby Fowne had decided to attend, but it was thought best that Isobel should not be present.

The Coroner, a well-known figure in the social life of London, surveyed the packed court with eyes that told of strong disapproval, as he entered to commence his inquiry.

"We are met here to-day, gentlemen," he said, "to inquire into the death of Mr. Michael Redding, an American citizen, aged forty, who died at the Dunheved Nursing-home on the evening of the 14th of this month. I want you, please, to disabuse your minds of all that you may have read since the death of this unfortunate gentleman was first published in the newspapers."

It was a close and stifling day, and the court, crammed to the doors, soon became suffocating.

All eyes remained focussed on the well of the court where the different persons concerned in the tragedy were seated.

The first and most important witness called was Sir Robert Brodie, the famous Home Office pathologist.

In reply to questions from the Coroner, he said that he had conducted a post-mortem examination on the body of Michael Redding.

"What do you consider was the cause of death?"

"The man died from morphia-poisoning."

"You have no doubt about that?"

"None whatever."

The curt finality of the famous expert's tone caused a fresh wave of excitement to throb through the crowded court.

"I will now ask you, Sir Robert, to give the remainder of your evidence in your own way," said the Coroner.

The vitally important fact stated by Sir Robert Brodie in his subsequent evidence, was that whereas a fatal dose of the drug was five grains, he had found no less a quantity than double this amount of morphia in the dead man's body.

Questioned further, he said that the fact that the deceased had been in the habit of receiving

a nightly injection of morphia did not tend him to change his opinion that the man had died from an abnormally large dose of morphia.

Witness followed witness. Hour after hour went by.

Fay and Dick passed through the witness box. Both gave their evidence in a straightforward manner, denying any guilty knowledge of Michael Redding's death.

Then came Nurse Fraser, on whom all eyes were centred.

The Coroner looked at this witness keenly.

"Now, tell me, Nurse Fraser," he said, "what caused you to make that exceedingly grave charge against the Matron? What definite proof had you to induce you to allege that the Matron had caused the death of her husband?"

There was a tense silence before the reply was uttered.

"Mr. Redding was afraid that he would be poisoned."

"How do you know this?" instantly questioned the Coroner.

"Because he told me so."

"You swear that he actually said this to you?"

"Yes, I swear it!"

"Did he say anything else to you?"

"Yes. He said that he knew that his wife was in love with Mr. Wingate and that she wished him dead so that they might get married."

"You swear that, too?"

"Yes."

"When did he tell you this?"

"He said it to me many times—but the last occasion was on the afternoon of the day of his death."

"Do you state that Mr. Redding was in fear of his wife?"

"Yes—I do."

"Coming to the phial of morphia tablets, Nurse Fraser, did you place them where they were found by Detective-Inspector Morris?"

The witness hesitated.

"No, I did not."

"Have you any knowledge of how they got to that place?"

The witness again hesitated momentarily.

"No, I have not," she replied.

"You swear that?"

"Yes—I swear it."

This concluded the Coroner's examination, and he now commenced to sum up. The time was 4 p.m. He stated that the jury must be especially careful in this case, not to allow their minds to be prejudiced in any respect. On the other hand, however, they must return a verdict strictly according to their consciences, and in accordance with the judgement they had formed upon the facts that had been placed before them.

Having received this injunction, the jury filed out of the court.

To everyone who had listened, the drama of the proceedings was now reaching its culmination. Upon the result of those twelve men's deliberations in an adjoining room depended the liberty—and perhaps the very life—of that beautiful woman sitting in the well of the court, one gloved hand cupping her face.

The waiting seemed almost intolerable. But, mercifully, the suspense was not too prolonged.

After twenty-five minutes, the jury re-entered the court. It was noticed, as they filed into their seats, that the foreman's face was twitching nervously.

The Coroner looked at him as he stood up.

"You have considered your verdict, Mr. Foreman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please be good enough to give me your verdict, then."

The foreman read from a paper which fluttered in his left hand.

"We consider that the deceased, Mr. Michael Redding, died as the result of an overdose of morphia, administered to him by his wife, the Matron of the Dunheved Nursing-home. We further consider that this overdose was criminally and not accidentally administered."

"You realize that your verdict amounts to a charge of murder against Mrs. Redding?"

"Reluctantly we do!"

A policeman stepped forward and stood beside Fay Dennison's chair.

II

Herbert Winter, confidential clerk in the employ of that well-known firm of London solicitors, Messrs. Hardwick, Read and White, looked at his visitor curiously.

"I am very sorry, Miss Fraser," he said, "but my principal, Mr. Hardwick, has told me to inform you that he cannot hold out any hope of complying with your request."

The caller, who was dressed in nurse's uniform, looked as though she had been dealt a blow.

"That means," she replied in a voice that broke and quavered with passion, "that you intend to swindle me out of it! I tell you again that not once but many times Mr. Michael Redding swore that he had made arrangements with your firm, his solicitors, for me to have all the money that he left!"

"Unfortunately, Miss Fraser, you cannot produce any proof. Not that I am doubting your word, please understand," the speaker continued, in a faintly satirical tone, "but in Law, proof is essential."

The caller banged her gloved fist on the table before her.

"I won't be swindled!" she cried; "I demand to see Mr. Hardwick!"

At that moment a door on the left, leading away from the general office, opened. A middle-aged man with a stern, clean-shaven face showed himself.

"What is going on here, Winter?" he demanded.

"Although I have given her your message, Mr. Hardwick, this lady persists in wanting to see you."

"I will give you just five minutes, no longer, Miss Fraser." The speaker stood aside for the caller to enter his private room, but the manner in which he closed the door testified to his feelings.

"I have allowed you this second interview, Miss Fraser," the senior partner stated, "because I think you badly need some good advice."

"What I want are my rights!" was the defiant answer.

Stephen Hardwick shrugged his shoulders.

"If you will allow me to continue," he said, "the less you press this claim against the estate of Mr. Michael Redding, the more discretion you will show."

"But I intend to press it. Mr. Redding

promised that he would leave his fortune to me when he died. He mentioned the name of your firm—I was to call on you——"

"Yes, yes, I dare say! But the important fact is, Miss Fraser, that you bring no proof with you except your bare word. I am not accusing you of lying, but our client, Mr. Michael Redding, did not leave a will in your favour. Nor did he once mention your name to us in any communication we received from him."

"Perhaps he sent it to his New York lawyers—he told me that you were merely his London agents."

"I am sorry to disappoint you again, Miss Fraser, but Mr. Redding did not make any provision for you so far as his New York solicitors are concerned. We cabled to them, and this is their reply."

The speaker rummaged amongst a pile of papers on his large desk, and then showed the caller a cablegram form, on which were the words:

> Michael Redding died intestate. No mention to us of woman Fraser.—Simson, Patrick & Co.

"I trust that will satisfy you?"

"I am not satisfied—I am being swindled."

At that the long-slumbering temper of the solicitor broke out.

"I should be quite within my rights, Miss Fraser, after that remark, if I called a policeman and requested him to remove you from my office. I may still do so—but before you go, I will give you the piece of advice which I promised at the commencement of this interview. It is this: your action in pressing your unfounded claim, if known to the proper authorities, might be misconstrued——"

The caller tossed her head.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded; "do you dare suggest that I had anything to do with Mr. Redding's death?"

"I suggest nothing—I merely give you what I consider to be some excellent advice. I repeat, you would do well, in my opinion, to act upon it. And now I must ask you to leave, Miss Fraser."

Herbert Winter, after showing the unwelcome visitor out, sat in a thoughtful attitude at his desk. During his association with the Law, he had taken a hand in unfolding many a human puzzle, but this Fraser business was the most extraordinary thing he had ever known. Extraordinary because he himself was mixed up in it. At least, if he wasn't mixed up in it, his sister was. Marjorie was the trusted maid of Mrs. Richard Wingate, and Richard Wingate was the big nerve specialist who had got himself mixed up in that nursing-home scandal.

The telephone rang.

"Is that you, Bert?"

"Why, Marjorie, I was just thinking about you! How's Frinton? Jolly nice to be some people! I suppose you're as brown as a berry—eh, what's that? You're back in Town? Staying at the Savoy. . . . Of course, I'll see you to-night. As a matter of fact, I've something to tell you—something—but I'll tell you at seven o'clock to-night. Good-bye."

III

"This is my brother, madam," announced Marjorie. "I trust you will excuse the liberty, but my brother is employed by a big firm of solicitors, and something happened at his office this afternoon which he thinks you ought to know about. Of course, madam, you will not say anything, because it would get my brother into serious trouble."

Isobel looked at the tall, respectably dressed man who stood by the maid's side, and felt confidence in him.

"What is it about, Mr. Winter?"

The answer made her catch her breath.

"It's something to do with the Dunheved Nursing-home, madam."

"Something you think I ought to know?"

"Something that either you or Mr. Wingate

ought to know, madam. At least, that is my opinion."

Five minutes later Isobel was in possession of the complete facts concerning Nurse Fraser's claim.

After thanking the man for his information, and assuring him that she would treat the matter in confidence, she pondered deeply over this fresh phase.

It seemed possible that this Nurse Fraser might have killed Michael Redding herself. Women before this had shown themselves wicked enough to commit such a terrible act for money. Naturally, having accomplished her fell purpose, she would seek to throw the blame on another person in order to safeguard herself.

How to get at the real facts! Somehow or other, she must see this Fraser woman and get the truth out of her.

In the meantime, an innocent woman was suffering the tortures of the damned.

It occurred to Isobel Wingate that should she succeed in this resolve, she would be the means of reuniting the husband whom she had lost with the woman who had taken her place. But that fact had no influence on her resolve.

IV

It was only when he reached home after the inquest that the nerve of Wingate collapsed.

Sitting in his study, the whole terrible picture of what had happened that day came back with such intensity that his body shook with cruel, convulsive sobs. Fay to be tried. . . .

The butler, distressed, came, but he waved him away.

In that Gethsemane his mind sought one person. This was not Fay—he was powerless to help her: only God could do that; it was not his wife—he had brought sufficient trouble upon Isobel, and, moreover, he had told her to keep out of the business. Yet, even if she had been in London, even if this curtain of restraint had not been drawn between them, hers would not have been the face into which he longed now to look. The blow which had fallen had struck right down to the roots of his soul; and it was a man's help he wanted now, not a woman's; a man's hand to be gripped, a man's understanding.

Wingate slumped forward in his chair. His face was hidden by his hands.

Quietly the door opened—so quietly that Wingate was not aware there was anyone else in the room until he felt that heartening clasp upon his shoulder.

"Dick, old boy!"

He thought at first that his ears had deceived him. Then he looked up—and there was the man of whom he had been thinking, and

without whose presence he had been afraid he would find that night intolerable.

"I hope you won't kick me out, Dick—and I hope you won't be cross with Jenkins. Against his will, I persuaded him to let me come through."

Wingate's voice was harsh and strained.

"Selby, I don't deserve this—but I wanted you! God, I wanted you badly!"

"Somehow I felt you might," was the reply; "that's why I came along. We've been pals for a good many years now, Dick, and—well, I thought you might like to have a chat."

Wingate seized the extended hand.

"Let's cut out what's happened lately, old man, and start afresh."

"Start where we left off, you mean. Right! Now, Dick, what can I do?"

"You can look after Isobel. I want her out of this."

"That's all right, Dick. Isobel has come to Town. Like the rest of us—Lady Sally and myself, I mean—she felt that she ought to be on hand in case she could do something."

A groan came from the other.

"She's staying at the Savoy," continued Selby Fowne; "I'll look after her. Don't you worry."

Wingate stood up.

"I suppose many people would think that

this thing had come as a judgement upon Fay and me. But now that everything is stripped clean between us, Selby, I want you to know that, situated as we were, neither of us could have acted differently from what we did. It was damnably hard on Isobel—God knows I realize that—but it's the simple truth I'm telling you!"

"I believe you, Dick! It's one of those puzzles which the more one tries to solve it the worse it becomes. And you'll have to go on, Dick?"

"Yes, old man, I shall have to go on. I've burned my boats, and, even if I wanted to—which, please understand, I don't—I could not turn round. That would be a cad's and a coward's trick!"

Fowne nodded. He was a man himself, and this was a man's code. Whatever pain it cost someone else, it could neither be gainsaid nor argued about.

"Fay will be acquitted, of course—damn it!" with a sudden explosion of anger; "she is bound to be acquitted, and then we shall go away—right away. I had arranged to go to New York, as you know, but once she is free of this filth, it will be New Zealand. Isobel—well, all I can do is to leave her well provided for. I've already made those arrangements." He paused. "She has good friends—who better than you and Lady Sally?—and in time she will forget."

His friend shook his head.

"She will never forget, Dick—but I think already she understands. . . . It's a wonderful thing for any woman to do that, Dick—let alone Isobel."

The speaker's voice broke a little, and Wingate stared at him.

"I've been worse than a Judas to you," he said simply; "you'll forget what I said in my mad haste the other night, Selby?"

"You don't think I took it seriously? It hurt at the time, because—" Fowne's hand shot out. It closed on Wingate's arm and pressed it with a force which seemed to send a flood of vitality from the speaker into the other's body.

"Selby, you're the better man—you've always been the better man! Isobel should have——"

"What we both want is a drink!" cut in the other sharply. Even in this moment, when their souls were bared to each other, Selby Fowne, Standard-bearer to the House of Wingate, kept his secret.

The cost? The Selby Fownes of this world—how pitiably few they are—do not count the cost.

CHAPTER XII

NURSE FRASER WRITES A LETTER

A MONTH had passed—a month of anguish indescribable. In spite of the fact that the more discerning of the general public believed there must be some ghastly mistake, Fay Dennison, the most discussed woman in the world, had been committed from Bow Street Police-station to take her trial at the New Bailey.

And now, from the Place of Grey Shadows, where she had been kept captive, the prisoner was brought to the huge wooden box which is called the Dock—this gently nurtured woman, charged with the most cruel and inhuman of all crimes: the poisoning of her own husband. . . .

The entire civilized globe knew the story by this time: for weeks the newspapers had served up this spicy dish, embellishing it as daringly as the Law would allow.

Such a crime as this had not come the way of the Criminal Bar, Press and Public for many years; and each and all endeavoured to make the most of it. The story which had been

unfolded both at the inquest and at the police-court hearing contained so many of the qualities necessary to rivet the public attention, that interest in the case swamped every other big happening.

On this stifling day of early August, there was a frantic endeavour on the part of the public to get into the court-room.

Bail had been refused, and during the weeks that Fay was imprisoned, she had never recovered from this shattering shock. She had passed those days in a kind of daze. When the charge had been read out to her, it was almost impossible to believe that this was reality . . . and yet, here she was now, standing facing the stern-visaged judge. . . .

The searing shame of it, the sordid beastliness, the cruel, frenzied unfairness! To stand thus exposed to that avidly whispering, nudging crowd! To know that Richard Wingate and she were considered guilty of an illicit passion, and that she was thought to have killed the man who stood in their way . . . how foul and shameful it was!

"Oh, dear God!" she whispered beneath her breath, "please send the end soon—*soon*. . . ."

A man wearing the wig and gown of a King's Counsel rose from his seat in the well of the court, and crossed to the dock.

"Courage, Mrs. Redding!" (How she hated

the name! Why did he not say Dennison?) "Have faith in the justice of your case."

The speaker was Sir Thomas Langton, the famous K.C., whom Matthew Barrington had briefed for the defence. From the date of the first interview, this splendid pleader, whose many sensational successes in murder and other important trials had made him one of the most prominent figures at the Criminal Bar, had stated his belief in her complete innocence. "On the face of it, it is a perfectly monstrous charge!" he declared.

Strength seemed to come to her from the quiet impressive words of the K.C. She remembered that she was not entirely without supporters. Apart from Dick, there was one other person who believed in her in this astounding crisis. That was her aunt. Lady Sally Doone had more than lived up to her promise. She had become a veritable champion of the oppressed, and had placed her entire wealth at the disposal of Matthew Barrington, the solicitor; and what was more, she devoted every possible minute of her time, that she was allowed, in giving the prisoner confidence, and endeavouring to assure her of an ultimate release from her agony.

"Believe that you killed that man? I wouldn't believe it if all the policemen in London swore it!" Lady Sally exclaimed in her characteristically forcible fashion.

A man whom Fay had been informed before would be the Clerk of the Court, now faced the dock. In a loud, clear, ringing voice, he said: "Fay Redding, you are charged on indictment with the offence of murder, the particulars being that on the 14th day of June, you murdered Michael Redding by poisoning him. Fay Redding, are you guilty or not guilty?"

She felt that she must choke; yet when she answered, her voice, to her surprise, was clear:

"I am not guilty!"

The business of swearing the jury was then proceeded with. These eight men and four women had an irresistible, if ghastly, fascination for her; she could not forget that they were her real judges; it was they who would determine her fate. Strange to think that that round-faced foreman with the scrubby moustache would in the near future have the power to say whether she was to suffer a shameful death, or whether she would be allowed to go free—free to live and love.

From the jury she looked at the tall, gaunt man with the hawk-like face. This was her enemy, for Sir Robert Read was Counsel for the Prosecution. He would try to prove her guilty—horrible ambition for any man.

During the hours that followed, Fay sought

refuge and solace by watching the face of the man she loved.

Whilst the Prosecution piled up its mountain of evidence against her, Wingate maintained unwaveringly an expression of confidence. Every now and then he would turn in her direction, and his glance would give her fresh hope. "Have no fear, dear." The message came as plainly as spoken words.

The reporters, whose duty it was to describe the trial and its principal actors, commented on the strange fact that the prisoner seemed to become more composed as the proceedings wore on; the most vivid impressionistic writer present stated, indeed, that her face took on an unearthly beauty.

Isobel looked at the girl as one looks at an adversary. It had taken infinite patience to induce Nurse Fraser to pay that visit to the small sitting-room at the Savoy Hotel.

"What do you want with me?" she demanded belligerently; "if it hadn't been for the help you offered me, I wouldn't have come. . . ."

The words ended in a choking sob.

"You poor soul!" exclaimed Isobel. Ready sympathy with the other's forlorn condition conquered every other feeling for the moment.

"I don't want your sympathy—you belong to the Lady Sally Doone lot—I know, because

I saw her pass out of here while I was waiting in the hall below. Lady Sally dismissed me from the nursing-home—I suppose you know that?"

"She did not tell me," parried the listener.

"Well, you know now. I was sent off with a month's money at a minute's notice—and I haven't been able to get a job anywhere else. That's why I've had to go hungry—and it was only because I was hungry and wanted help that I came along to see you."

"You will not regret coming—I can promise you that." Isobel rang the bell. "I am just going to have some coffee and sandwiches—can I offer you some?"

"Well, I've had nothing since this morning," replied the visitor.

The sandwiches eaten, Isobel drew her chair nearer to the girl.

"I want to say at once, Nurse Fraser, that if I can help you in any way, you have only to ask me."

"And now, I suppose, you want value for that offer?" was the cynical reply.

"I want you to tell me the truth. I don't suppose you will——"

"Was it to enjoy calling me a liar that you invited me here?" She sprang from her chair.

"Sit down again and listen, Miss Fraser."

The calm tone had a quietening effect.

"Upon your evidence mainly will depend the fate of an innocent woman."

"How do you know she is innocent? *I* say she's guilty. And I don't know why I'm staying here talking over the case—it wouldn't do, I feel sure, if it were known."

Her hostess remained curiously unruffled.

"We are two women deeply stirred by a terrible tragedy, Miss Fraser; someone who is very near and dear to me is gravely implicated in that tragedy——"

The caller interrupted.

"I can't understand your point of view at all," she said. "Aren't you the wife of the man who was going to run away with that woman?"

"Yes."

"And yet you want to believe that she's innocent?"

The other smiled.

"I don't want to believe she is innocent, Miss Fraser—I *know* she is innocent! My husband would not admire a woman who had committed a crime."

Nurse Fraser gasped.

"Well, you beat me!" she exclaimed. "I can't understand you at all. I hated Dennison—as we called her—as it was, but I should have hated her a lot more if she had taken a man away from me! You don't seem to be ordinary flesh and blood, Mrs. Wingate!"

"I'm ordinary flesh and blood all right; perhaps you don't understand—perhaps you have never loved anyone very deeply yourself, Miss Fraser?"

"I loved one man—but he was a rotter and he let me down," came the sullen reply; "ever since then I've always been a better hater than a lover!"

Isobel looked at her with pity. In spite of her load, she felt herself thankful that she was different from this girl. It must be terrible to have a nature like that.

But—and the thought made her start—this flash of revelation showed up the girl's real nature. "I'm more of a hater than a lover."

"What caused you to hate Miss Dennison?" she asked.

"I hated her—that's a good enough reason, isn't it?"

"Not for me—and, I warn you, Miss Fraser, I'm afraid it will not be a good enough reason for the Counsel for the Defence to-morrow."

"What do you mean by that?" harshly demanded the girl.

"Exactly what I say. The plain reason of hating a person is not sufficient cause for charging that person with a terrible crime."

The girl sullenly bit her lip.

"I've only said the truth. I believe she did it."

"Can you look me in the face and swear that, Nurse Fraser?"

The girl sprang up again.

"Look here, what's your game?"

"My 'game'—as you call it—is to try to save an innocent woman from being wrongly condemned. I believe Miss Dennison, as I have already told you, to be innocent. If she is condemned, you will have a dreadful load on your conscience for all eternity. I leave you with that thought—you can go."

And, because the continued sight of this girl was now almost unbearable, Isobel turned and walked out of the room.

A good hater Emily Fraser had declared herself to be. Yet even the reflection that the woman she hated more than any other person in the world was undergoing the worst kind of anguish, was not satisfying her now; on the contrary, it was for the first time distinctly disturbing.

She had not known her bed to be uncomfortable before, but now she tossed and turned in a vain endeavour to get some sleep.

But those disturbing thoughts would not be banished. They were like so many evil imps annoying her with their ceaseless attack. In vain she used every trick of the sufferer from insomnia, but the more ardently she tried to

free her mind, the more relentlessly did the thoughts which had come to her since the interview with Mrs. Wingate return.

Emily Fraser had never considered herself very imaginative; indeed, the probability is that she would have laughed the suggestion to scorn. But the memory of the woman with whom she had talked that evening remained very vivid. It was because she found herself speculating as to what type of person Isobel Wingate could really belong, that the procession of disturbing reflections that were now robbing her of sleep, started to spring up in her mind.

The strange thing was, that whereas she had not been afraid of the awful panoply of the Law, that whilst the sight of the judge in his scarlet and ermine, and the spectacle of the famous lawyers in their wigs and gowns had not induced terror, one searching glance from that gentle-faced woman, whom she could have crushed by superior physical strength, had sent a deep-shafted quiver of dismay into her heart.

Why had she been persuaded by that fool of a clerk to go to the Savoy Hotel? Before, she had not been afraid of anything. Her story had been accepted. And the more she thought about that story, the more probable, the more flawless, did it appear. This version made the circumstantial evidence appear so strong against

the woman she hated that her sense of revenge was complete.

Revenge! That was what had urged her on. That was what had made her cry the word "murderess" on the evening of the tragedy. Smarting under a sense of grievance—Dennison had continually criticized her warped nature—she knew it to be warped, and gloried in the fact—had enabled her to find a weapon terrible in its power.

It was not that she really believed the Matron to be guilty, but her malignant spite had induced her, not only to accept this view herself—but to make the world accept it. The sight of Fay Dennison's beautiful face quivering in agony had been the keenest satisfaction to her. What mattered if this satisfaction was sent by the Devil?

Never for a moment had she herself been afraid; never for a moment until—now. . . .

It was recalling Isobel Wingate's look—that look which seemed to have peered straight into her heart—which caused that first dynamic throb of terror.

She sat up in bed. How had that woman read her secret? What was it she had said? What had she meant by saying her hatred of the Matron would not be a sufficient excuse——?

Fear quickened her senses. What before had been nothing but an unholy excitement, now became charged with dreadful significance.

To-morrow she would have to go into the witness-box again, there to be questioned by the man who was endeavouring to prove the woman Dennison innocent.

Her mind rendered unnaturally acute by this new-found sense of fear, she saw the face of Sir Thomas Langton peering at her through the darkness of that tiny bedroom—saw it, and shuddered at it because of its expression of terrible anger. That afternoon she had been able to look at the Counsel for the Defence calmly and without a tremor. But then he had been sitting down, and, because his time had not yet come, he did not make a single remark.

But, to-morrow— He would be on his feet, raining question after question at her, seizing on her slightest hesitation, searching continuously, pitilessly for the TRUTH!

And he would get it!

A thunderbolt of revelation came. She knew that she could not face that ordeal, let alone survive it. Another blinding flash and she knew why: It was because another woman's clean white soul had made her not only afraid, but ashamed.

Emily Fraser saw herself now as an accused thing, a person so tainted that she wished to flee from all mankind. It was she who was the murderess—hadn't she been willing, more, hadn't she used every endeavour, to send a

woman to the scaffold, just because of a spirit of petty spite?

Again her mind returned to Isobel Wingate. Actuated by the sense of awakened decency, she realized how wonderful this woman was. Even now she could not understand it properly—but sufficient comprehension had come to know that, because Isobel Wingate's husband loved Dennison, she wished to save her through that love.

She herself—paltry, worthless creature that she was—had been willing to use every unscrupulous means to gain her horrible end. In that moment of fresh revelation she felt a deep surge of thankfulness that the terror which had gripped her so mercilessly before had cleansed her soul.

It was not too late. Thank God for that!

Springing out of bed, she rummaged among her few belongings for a pad and pencil.

For the next half an hour Emily Fraser wrote like one possessed.

That task done, she put the several sheets of paper inside an envelope, which she stamped and addressed; then, with the same feverish eagerness, she put on her clothes. Whilst doing so, a glance out of the window showed a man walking steadily up and down in the street below.

A fresh spasm of fear gripped her. She was being watched!

But there was a back way. It meant climbing over the garden-wall, and creeping down that noisome alley, but she would have to do it. She had to get away to hide.

Gently shutting the door, she went soft-footed down the stairs.

Haggard-eyed, Fay woke to another dreadful dawn. Two more days, the wardress had told her the night before, and the End would come. Two more days, when every hour seemed an Eternity. . . .

They brought her food and drink of a sort, these grim-faced women who were her gaolers. In their way they were kind, almost sympathetic, although their hideous trade might have been expected to blunt every fine or decent feeling.

"Don't worry, my dear," said one, "you'll be all right. They never h—er, I mean, they have a long way to go before they find you guilty. As for that nurse-person, I don't believe in her a bit. . . ."

The Judge adjusted his spectacles and regarded the court.

"Before we proceed further with this case," he said, "I must inform the Learned Counsel, and you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, of the contents of a remarkable letter which has reached me by this morning's post.

"This letter," the grave voice continued, "bears the signature of a very important witness in this case. I refer to the Nurse Fraser —Emily Fraser. Statements she has placed on these sheets of paper," tapping those he held in his left hand, "are such that, after hearing them, the Learned Counsel for the Crown may consider it expedient to abandon the Prosecution."

Instantly the court-room became a babel of sound. The spectators had come feeling certain that that day's proceedings would be even more dramatic than the previous ones—but here was a greater sensation than any they had anticipated!

The murmurings were sternly repressed.

"If there is any further disturbance, I will have the court cleared," the Judge said.

Then he settled to reading the letter, every word of which was clearly to be heard.

This is what he read:

"My Lord,

"I have to write before it is too late.

"Hating Matron Dennison has made me a wicked creature—turned me mad, I think. Now—while there is yet time—I want to tell the truth.

"What I said yesterday was untrue. Mr. Michael Redding never told me that he was afraid his wife would poison him. It was

a lie what I said. He wrote the note, I think, but that is all.

"I don't think Matron Dennison poisoned him. I hated her because she criticized me for not doing things properly, but I have never really believed that she killed her husband. I made out she had, because I hated her and wanted to get my revenge.

"What happened was this: about tea-time on the day he died, Mr. Redding told me he was suffering great pain. He begged me to get him some morphia tablets. I knew it was wrong, but Mr. Redding had promised me all his money after he was gone—and he couldn't live much longer, I knew—and so I stole the Matron's keys and took a phial of morphia tablets out of the drugs cupboard. I did this quite on my own, and no one is to blame but myself.

"I intended only to let Mr. Redding have two of those tablets—that would have been sufficient to deaden his pain—but just as I got back into his room, I heard the Matron's bell. I was flurried and did not know quite what I was doing. I was afraid I should be caught with the tablets, and that would have meant instant dismissal.

"I put the phial in the top drawer of the table by the side of the bed, intending to come back later. I was in such a fluster that I

forgot Mr. Redding might be able to get at them.

"Now that I am telling the truth at last, I may as well say that that is what I believed happened. He could reach the drawer with his right hand. I think he must have got hold of the phial, swallowed several of the tablets, and so killed himself. At any rate I feel sure that Matron Dennison is quite innocent, and I am sorry I lied about her.

"Yours respectfully,

"EMILY FRASER."

There was a pregnant silence for two moments, and then Sir Thomas Langton sprang to his feet.

"In the face of that letter, my Lord, I ask that my client be discharged forthwith."

He looked at the hawk-faced K.C., who led for the Crown.

Sir Robert Read rose.

"My Lord," he said to the Judge, "I have pleasure in complying with the wish of my learned friend. May I ask that the prisoner be discharged!"

The Judge nodded.

"In the strange circumstances which have arisen, there is no other course," he said. "Prisoner at the bar, you are free to leave the Court."

When she awoke out of that fainting fit which had prostrated her in the dock, the first person Fay saw was Isobel Wingate.

"My dear," said Dick's wife, "how thankful I am!" And then, stooping, she kissed her.

Isobel was in the car which drove the released captive back to Lady Sally's house in Brook Street. It was only when she knew that Fay had been made as comfortable as ministering hands and loving hearts could make her, that she left for her hotel.

It was a strange scene—for Dick had been present all the while—but she forgot the strangeness of it; ignored it in her deep feeling of gratitude.

Dick's happiness had been secured; nothing else mattered.

Selby Fowne was waiting at the Savoy.

"How is she?" he asked. "I was too busy to get to the court, but a friend on a newspaper telephoned me the news."

"She is splendid!" declared Isobel. "She fainted in the dock, when she heard the Judge say she was free, but soon came round. Dick is with her now."

Fowne fiddled with his collar.

"Isobel, my dear, can you go on standing the strain? It's not human, you know."

Her face became lit with a wonderful smile.

"Selby, not a person in a million, perhaps,

could hope to understand me—but you do, I know. Didn't we thresh this all out ages ago? Don't you realize that I have disciplined myself? My creed now is to do what is best for Dick."

"And you will sacrifice yourself?"

"Yes—because I think, by doing so, I can render him the greater service. If I had had a child, it might have been different—but now I feel strong enough to go on."

Selby Fowne turned away lest she should see too plainly what was in his face.

Only a mile or so away Richard Wingate was stooping over a chesterfield.

"Fay!" he said breathlessly.

The woman he addressed smiled up into his face. But it was a wan little smile.

"Dick," she replied, "I want you to do me a great favour."

"Of course," was the instant reply.

"I want you to leave me entirely alone for a week."

"But——"

"I can't hope to explain, dear, except to say that I want to be free to think. I am going away into the country to-morrow—Lady Sally has arranged it—and I want to be left to myself. Will you give me that week, Dick?"

As Wingate, sorely puzzled, nodded his head, he felt that the woman who spoke to him was a stranger.

CHAPTER XIII

ACROSS THE RIVER

AT the end of the week Fay wrote:

DEAR OLD DICK,

Will you please come down and see me? There is a hotel near where you would be quite comfortable.

FAY.

The letter was written from Hythe, on the Kentish coast.

Wingate pondered over the letter. The wording seemed so unlike Fay—the Fay he had known before that ghastly trial. It was so restrained, so bloodless: the letter of a stranger almost.

Then he remembered that when Fay had gone away, she had seemed more like a stranger than her real self.

He changed trains at Sandling, which is the very heart of Kentish beauty, and the calm sweep of the country soothed his jaded mind. But directly he saw Fay on the platform at Hythe, he felt his worst forebodings realized—

this woman was not Fay; she had changed in some material way. Changed mentally, and even physically it seemed.

He felt constrained. All the way down in the train he had promised himself that when he saw Fay, he would catch her in his arms; and if there was any difference on her part, he would drive it away by sheer warmth of his embrace. But, looking at her, he had the feeling that it would somehow be a brutal indignity, almost a sacrilege, to kiss her. The sensation was uncanny, but nevertheless it was very strong and unmistakable.

"I have booked you a room at the Imperial," she told him.

They were in the taxi by this time, descending the hill which leads from the station.

"What have you been doing with yourself all the week? Every post I expected a letter—but never a line! I could not write myself because I had no address. Tell me, Fay," he persisted, "what have you been doing with yourself?"

"Thinking, dear," was the reply.

The two words were uttered in a tone that made Wingate study her face. Fay had a far-away expression; her eyes were softly shining.

"Thinking—of what?" he demanded, almost angrily.

"Our future, Dick—yours and mine."

She did not turn to him as she spoke, but continued to look out of the taxi window.

Wingate followed her gaze, wondering what it could be that was attracting her attention.

Below him, stretched out in a wide panorama, was the little town by the side of the sea. A mile or so from the shore was a large liner steaming down the Channel.

He caught her hand.

"I know what you are thinking, Fay; you are thinking of our trip to New Zealand. Tell me, isn't that so?" There was a fervour of pleading in his voice. Something cold had touched him. The woman beside him was more than ever a stranger. She seemed aloof, incommunicable, a being apart, wrapped in her own vistas which he himself could not see.

"Dick, dear, we will have our talk to-night," was what she replied; and with this answer he had to be content.

Past the golf links which abut on the Imperial Hotel, and by the side of the picturesque military canal, there is a seat placed overlooking the sea. It was here that Fay and Dick Wingate had their talk.

"I brought you here, dear," she said, "because it was while I was sitting on this seat that I saw things clearly for the first time—and then came to my resolution."

"What resolution?" he sharply demanded. This suspense had fretted Wingate's nerves badly.

She did not answer at first, but remained looking out to sea with that far-away expression in her eyes.

"Dick," she said at length, "I am going to be a coward."

"You! A coward!" He scoffed at the suggestion.

"Yes, dear—a coward. At least, that is what you will call me, I am afraid, when I tell you my resolve"—she paused—"not to live the rest of my life with you."

He caught her arm.

"Was it for this that you brought me down here?" he demanded harshly. "Yes, if that is your precious decision, Fay, I do call you a coward! For you are afraid to accept your own happiness!"

"What is happiness, Dick? Is it satisfying our own wishes or desires at the expense of someone else?"

"I don't know what you mean." But, deep down, he was beginning to comprehend the change that had taken place in his companion's mind.

"Both of us have been selfish, Dick," Fay continued; "selfish at the expense of the noblest woman I have ever met. When our trouble came, we were both so headstrong, so

self-willed, so determined to seize our happiness at any cost, that God saw fit to punish us——"

"Rubbish, Fay! Thousands—hundreds of thousands have done exactly like us and lived tremendously happy lives."

He put as much feeling as he could summon into his words, and yet, even to Wingate, they sounded empty and forced. What had happened? He was beginning to feel that a change had taken place in himself. If it were not so, he would have crushed the woman to him, and fought her will with his own.

She shook her head.

"That may be so, Dick, although I feel sure that many of those same people have their uneasy moments. But I don't want to feel that we are grouped with those kind of men and women. And, as I have said, I thank God He has given me a warning."

"Is it that which has made you afraid, Fay?"

"No. If I felt I was doing right, I would still go away with you, Dick. But now I am going away by myself. To-morrow I shall sign a contract to go to China——"

"China!"

"To work as a medical missionary. There is tremendous need of young, strong, healthy women."

Wingate was stunned.

"You will return to Isobel of course, Dick," continued the calm, assured voice with the deep, ringing note of resignation; "you will make her happy, and she will make you happy. We have had our hour, Dick—and the memories will be dearer than ever reality would have been."

"Why do you say this?" he asked dully.

"Because I feel that everything has been ordered. Dear, do not think I am callous—it is because I love you so deeply that I am going away. It is a woman's excuse, no doubt—but my love so far has brought you nothing but trouble——"

"Never mind that."

"But that is the principal part of my defence: I *must* mind that. Your association with me, dear, has lowered you in the eyes of the world. But you are cleared now, and you will be able to rebuild. It is because you must be given every chance of rebuilding that I am going away. Dick—can't you see that?"

"Only dimly," he replied; "but even so, I think you are very wonderful, Fay."

"It is Isobel who is wonderful. When I think of her I feel so small that I want to run away and hide myself. And now, dear, before we walk back, will you assure me that you understand and that you do not reproach me?"

"God knows I only admire you," he replied.

They said good-bye at the entrance of the house where she was staying.

"No, don't kiss me, Dick—I might not be able to stand it," Fay said; "give me your hand."

As he did so she took it in both her own.

"God watch over you, dear—and make you happy," she said; and then was gone.

The lump in Wingate's throat grew bigger and bigger as he watched her walk up the flagged path.

He turned down the street and got on to the front. The sea was a sheet of silvered splendour. He stood watching the waves; and the vision that filled his mind was not of Fay Dennison but of another woman—Isobel, his wife. At that same moment, perhaps, she was looking out of her window at Frinton, watching the sea beat against the shore.

He cursed himself as he turned away. Fay had reproached herself, but the blame was entirely his. He had been a cad all through, studying only himself, willing to sacrifice the two finest women in the world, for his own selfish ends.

And now he had lost both! Fay had told him to go back to Isobel, but his pride would not allow him to do that. How could he expect Isobel to take him back? She had lost

her faith—and without faith, such a nature as Isobel's could find no love. She would receive him, but he would have to live on husks. And husks from Isobel. . . .

New York! The two words filled his mind as, walking along the almost deserted sea-front, he came to the entrance to the hotel. In his work in a new city he would be able, perhaps, to achieve some measure of forgetfulness.

The manager met him as he turned into the smoking-room.

"Will you please ring up Langham 01254, Mr. Wingate? A call came through for you from London half an hour ago."

Langham 01254! That was Selby Fowne's number.

"Shall I put in the call, sir?"

"If you will. Thank you."

Five minutes later he heard Fowne's voice.

"Is that you, Dick? Isobel was taken ill to-night. Lady Sally rang me up from Frinton. With your permission, I intend to go down. . . . What is it? Pneumonia, I think. . . . What? You will—" And then, in an entirely altered tone: "You will? I'll tell her, old boy!"

Only a quarter of an hour had passed before Wingate was speeding through the night in the first motor-car that he could hire.

His bag packed, he found time to write the briefest note to Fay:

Isobel very ill. Going to her.
DICK.

It was a nightmare journey. Every minute a message beat relentlessly through his brain. It was: "If she dies, I shall have killed her!"

Crisis had followed crisis—but this was the greatest of all. With the shadow of death possibly hovering over her, Wingate saw things in a light that was so clear as to be blinding.

Isobel, after all, was his true mate. Blinded by that other passion, he had allowed this fundamental fact to escape him; but now he knew and recognized it to be the greatest truth in the world.

A thousand memories thronged his mind. Little happenings that had occurred years before came back to sting his conscience and quicken his already deep sense of remorse.

How well now he remembered what Lady Sally Doone had said on the day he took over his duties at the Dunheved Nursing-home!

"The fact that I have offered you this appointment, Dick, is due as much to Isobel as to yourself. Without your charming wife

you might still be a clever man, Richard Wingate, but I doubt if you would be half so successful." And when he had smiled at her as one friend to another, she had added: "You may not realize it yourself, but Isobel has organized your career. She has proved an ideal wife in that as well as other respects."

It did not take much searching of his mind to know that this was true. The years passed before him in a slowly moving panorama: he could trace Isobel's influence, now that he was looking for it, in hundreds of directions. She who, with her wonderful charm and perfect tact, might have shone as a leader of Society, had willingly sacrificed herself so that she might devote herself exclusively to his advancement. Never once had he called upon her aid in vain.

And now—good God!—she might be dying. . . .

Wingate, as he urged the driver to yet greater speed, was reminded of what a man who had narrowly escaped being drowned had once told him—that in the short space during which he thought he had gone down for the last time the whole of his life seemed to pass him in review. In his own case, the pleasure of five happy years seemed blotted out by the events of the past few weeks.

Lady Sally Doone greeted him when he

arrived at the hotel in the early hours of the morning.

"How I hoped you would come!" were her first words.

"Surely you didn't think I should stay away?" was the almost savage retort. "I've come to get her well—to bring her back from death, if needs be! Is Selby with her?"

Lady Sally put her two small hands on the lapels of his coat.

"My prayers have been answered, Dick. Yes, Selby hasn't left the room since he arrived just after eleven."

"Good! If skill and love can pull her through, we shall save her. Selby was very reticent over the phone, but I guessed that Isobel was very ill."

"She is. It came on so suddenly, too. Poor dear; I needn't remind you what she has gone through lately. She hasn't been feeling well for a day or so, but it seemed to be merely a chill. Then, this morning, Marjorie came to my room to say that her mistress had decided to stay in bed.

"Marjorie said that she didn't like the look of Mrs. Wingate, and would be glad if I would go in and see her as soon as I was dressed.

"It wasn't until after dinner, however, that I felt any real alarm, and then I called in a local doctor. His report was so grave—he said that pneumonia had intervened on top of the

influenza—that I phoned for Selby Fowne. I should have wired to you, of course, if I had known your address—but I didn't."

"Don't remind me of that, Sally. But I'm here now, and I'm going to fight—*fight*—you understand? Now go, dear, and tell Selby that I've come."

Her eyes wet with tears, Lady Sally left the room.

The two friends' hands met in a deep grip.

"Selby, you are in charge—fight, as you've never fought before!"

"I'm going to!" was the reply. "I must tell you the truth, old man—she has a chance, but it's a small one. I've never known pneumonia work such havoc in so short a time. Of course, she was an easy prey—mental and physical strengths were both gone."

His listener stopped pacing the floor

"But there is a chance, you say?"

"Yes, there is a chance. She's unconscious now, but when she wakes, shall I tell her you are here?"

"Tell her—good God, man—yes! Tell her I've come back to her! Tell her that I'm forcing her to get well!"

"I'll tell her," said Fowne, and went, without asking another question.

It was not until the first faint stirrings of the dawn showed in the room that Selby spoke to Wingate again.

"She's asking for you," he said.

"How is she?" whispered the other tensely. Wingate looked as though he had aged ten years in four hours.

"She'll live!" declared Selby Fowne—"Come!"

Through the mists that made it difficult for Wingate to see, he stumbled to the side of the bed, and fell upon his knees.

"Dick!—is that you?" asked a faint—a pitiably faint voice.

"It's I, Isobel," he choked.

"I dreamt that you were holding out your hands to me . . . you were on the other side of a deep river. . . . I thought I should not be able to come back—but I have. . . . And now I want you to stay near me. . . ."

"For ever and ever," he replied.

In the small room at Hamilton Circus, where they had spent so many happy hours, four people were sitting at dinner. . . .

"I propose a toast," said Lady Sally Doone. Her voice was shaken with restrained joy. She stood up, champagne glass in hand.

"The House of Wingate!" she called.

Dick's right hand was held by his wife, but he stretched the left across the table.

Selby Fowne's covered it as he drained his glass.

THE END